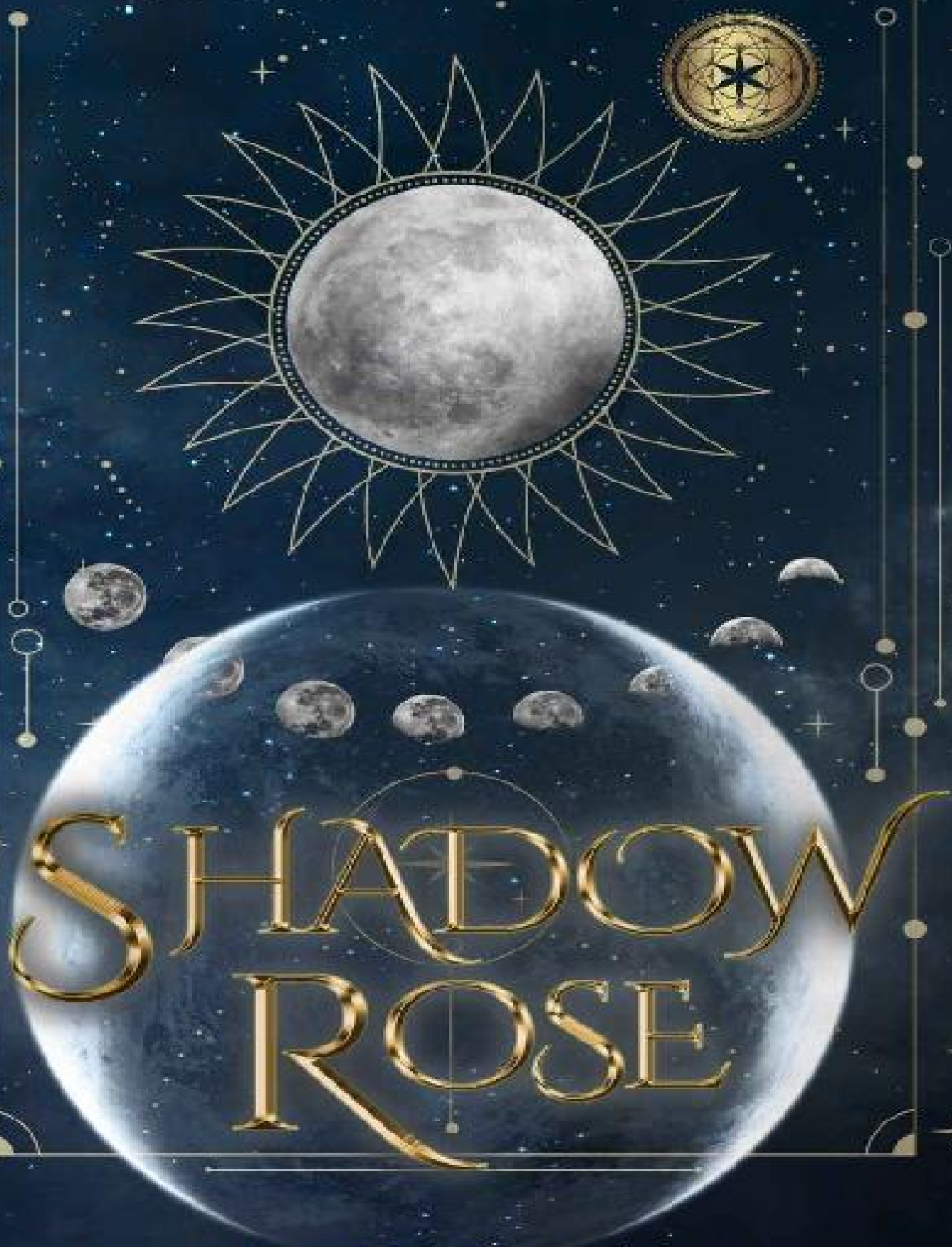


BOOK ONE IN THE DAUGHTERS OF
THE MOON AND SUN DUOLOGY



ELSIE QUAIL

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Shadow Rose



Elsie Quail



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To everyone still trying to find their place

Prologue

It is said the Moon was in love with the Sun, and the Sun was in love with the Moon. Their passion burned like an inferno; their love flowed like water. Stolen kisses in the dead of night, words of promise whispered in the soft morning light. A love so complete, it was all-encompassing. The realms lived in harmony. Then came two daughters of starlight and sunbeams, flame and shadows.

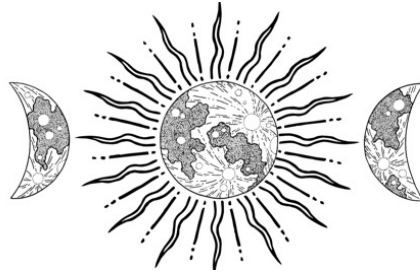
The universe was at peace.

Harmony cannot last, for without conflict there will never be tranquility. The Moon and the Sun had their hearts torn apart. A ruined family, a stolen daughter. A sister abandoned. Deep sadness descended upon the world, the Moon dimming her light. She wept, dark black tears fell over the land, turbulent storms marred the sea.

A centuries long revenge that came with a prophecy. There will be one who will reunite the Moon and Sun with Flame and Shadow. There is one who will restore balance.

Reunite the Moon and Sun with Flame and Shadow for this is how we flourish once again

The Lady of Darkness



Drip, drip, drip

Water? It stirred her out of something akin to slumber. Assaulting her ears. She tried to look around, and she found that she was blinded. She could feel a rough cloth chafing the delicate skin around her three eyes, making it raw; a far cry from the ruby red silk sash she wore during judgment. She could feel blood mix with oily tears running down her face. She tried to reach up to tear it off, but her wrists were stopped short. Heavy iron bracelets kept her in place. They dragged her arms back down to her sides. Where was she?

The last thing she remembered was sitting in the library with her daughter, enjoying the laughter coming from the child as she showed off what she had learned in her latest lessons. Her daughter's powers were getting stronger, her little shadow. She remembered a scream, and the wall imploding. It comes to her then, *Balo*. He had kidnapped her lovely daughter. Stole her away. Where could she be?

Trying to piece together where she was, she felt the rough stone beneath her. Damp and cold, far beneath the ground, if she had to guess. Crying out, her voice ricocheted off the walls around her and she realized that she was in a small room. She could only guess that it was dark, for she could see no light coming from under the cloth around her eyes. She felt the heavy irons around her wrists following the links to find they bound her to the floor. She tried to pull herself free, straining against the cuffs. She began to melt her pale skin, seeing in her mind as it turned to liquid.

She pictured the obsidian bone beneath, hard as stone. She pulled again and felt a burn through her body. She reformed the skin and tried again, liquifying it away to the bone. However, as much as she tried to free herself, her shackles bound her further.

Silvered iron, she thought to herself. The one thing that would keep her in this prison. Made from metals mined from the great mountains to the North, near the entrance to the seven water realms. There were few who knew the properties of the iron from the North, herself included. She knew though, that with the help of a sorceress magic could be infused into the metal and bind ancient beings. This is where she found herself, The First Goddess, ensnared by mere metal. Silvered Iron would keep her in place. Only one being could break it. Her chest caved in at the thought that he felt a million miles away. She found that if she tried to rise, she could only make it to a half crouch. Her back scraped against the stone. She felt the skin begin to rip; the flesh pulling away from the bone. She cried out again, hearing her voice come back to her echoing over and over again. Sinking back to the floor feeling defeated, she could sense someone else in the room with her.

Balo.

"You'll pay for this," she spoke quietly but with a powerful malice underscoring her words. "Do you even know who I am?"

"*My Lady*," The disembodied voice of the king sneered at her. "How would I not know who you are? I am the one who captured you. I will not be paying for anything. You have brought this upon yourself." She could hear him walk around her, his footsteps ringing out in the silence.

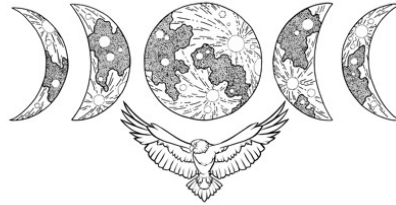
"What do you want?" she asked, trying to hide her fear. A metallic sting in the back of her throat threatened to cut off her air. She had never felt fear before. It crept into her chest, laying on top of her like a thousand stones. She was a Goddess, the Lady of Darkness. *Mother Moon*. The Goddess, who was both, feared and loved. She ruled the Afterworld! She made sure souls were provided for, or punished, depending on how they lived their lives in the mortal realm. How had a mere human captured her? Nothing was making any sense to her. She tried again to see through the cloth covering her eyes, trying to see the man who she could feel now standing in front of her, but it was futile.

"*Revenge*, dear Mother Moon," was all she heard the man say, as the metallic clang of a cell door closing reached her ears, then his footsteps

disappeared down what sounded like a corridor away from her.

She felt herself wavering again. She was weak. She cannot recall how long she had been here. All she knew was that she felt as if she was fading. As her mind slipped to black, she wondered again how she got here. She could not fathom how this had happened. For there's only one creature that can ensnare a God, and that is another God.

Chapter One



An insistent knocking dragged Mae out of a deep sleep.

"Three eyes of the Lady, what time is it?" Glancing out the window, she could see the streetlamps were still on, their oil burning low. She figured it was sometime between too fucking late and way too Gods damned early for this to be happening. Swiping at her eyes and rubbing the crust of sleep off them, she rolled out of bed. She ran her hands through her curls, her fingers snagging on the ends. Pulling a fur-lined robe about herself, she glared at the door again as the knocking continued.

"Yeah, I hear you. Fuck the Lady, I was really enjoying that sleep. Had some great dreams going on!" she grumbled to herself. As she made her way toward the door, she considered slowing down to extract a small revenge against whoever was waking her. In the end, she hurried toward the heavy wooden door. Unlatching the metal links to open it, she started to speak before the door was fully open.

"By the Lady, this better be worth losing slee... Kiel? What are you doing here? Three eyes, do you *know* what Gods damned time it is? The Sun is hours off. I swear to Mother Moon if this isn't worth my time, I will chop those damn fingers off and feed them to Orion!" She made a move toward him, lifting her arms as if to strangle the man standing on the other side of the threshold.

"I'm sorry Maeva, I really am," Kiel started. He ran his hand through his pale blonde waves. Making his hair stick out every which way, he

looked troubled by something. Mae glanced at his face, at his drawn dark eyes, bruised from lack of sleep.

"Mae," she states. Balking at the ridiculous notion, she was reminding her friend what to call her at this unholy hour.

"And when was the last time you slept, Kiel? You look like absolute shit." The day-old blonde stubble lined his chin, his cheeks looked slightly sunken. His usual glowing gold skin seemed to have dimmed. He needed sleep, and a lot of it. Lighting a cigarette and inhaling deeply, Kiel leveled his eyes at her.

"First, I was also sleeping peacefully, so get off it. Second, I look great, as always, and third it's Ophelia. She says it's urgent. She says she needs you *now*," emphasizing the now. Waiting for him to continue, to give her any inclination to what Ophelia wants, Mae looked at Kiel. He started to fidget under her leaf green stare. Inhaling again and blowing out smoke circles, he continued.

"I don't know anything else. She just said 'now' there was no further explanation."

"Okay, okay..." Mae replied, starting to panic. "Give me five minutes." She was feeling frantic, her chest getting tight. Ophelia never just needed her, not without an explanation, and especially not in the middle of the night. Ophelia was one of the strongest people she knew.

"I can give you three." Kiel said, huffing on his cigarette, a nasty habit but the only one he had. Mae scowled and hastily shut the door. In her rush to see Ophelia again, she knocked into Orion's perch. The black eagle screeched his annoyance at her. Ruffling up his golden tipped feathers to appear bigger than he was. Mae turned to see her companion standing a mere ten inches high. It was not the most absurd thing that she has encountered tonight, but the sight of the tiny eagle makes her laugh. Probably delirious from the late hour. He glared, his green eyes, a mirror of her own.

"I'm sorry Ri, but it's Ophelia! You understand, don't you? I have to be quick. I have to see her again." Mae reaches out to pet the bird. Orion screeches again in annoyance. Puffing his chest out, he started to shift, until he was a seven-foot-tall eagle, large enough for Mae to ride on.

"Alright, you've made your point Ri. I am sorry I disturbed your sleep. You are the most precious bird of prey. You need your beauty sleep, so you can be the most handsome bird. Please forgive me, for I am but a stupid

mortal," sarcasm oozed out of her mouth. Despite the tone of her voice, Orion jumped down from his perch. He tucked his razor-sharp beak back under his black wing. Chirping what sounded to Mae like back talk before finally drifting back to sleep. Clearly, she had been forgiven. Orion was more than an eagle; he was her best friend. They had been together for years; ever since the incident on the roof, Mae felt as if he had been sent to her to keep her company since her parents never paid her much mind. Orion helped to keep her in relative check and mostly out of trouble. His feathers had dried more tears than she could count. She loved this bird; he would never abandon her.

I'll bring him something on my way back. He really does put up with a lot of shit from me. Mae thought to herself. Knowing that Orion would always be won over with food. She would have to start being more loving toward the beast. Orion let out a sharp cry in his sleep, a sound that would wake the dead if given the chance.

Well, I can start to show him more love tomorrow.

Thinking of Ophelia her sapphire blue eyes came to mind first, a deep blue, like a vast ocean. She saw the blue sparkling in the sunlight, glittering when she laughed, glistening when she cried. She could get lost in those eyes. Her best friend was the most beautiful woman she knew.

Looking in the mirror, tired leaf green eyes stared back at her. Alarming against her moon pale skin. Mae dragged her fingers through her ebony hair, pulling it back and securing it away from her face with a leather cord. She searched around her bed, quickly finding and pulling on leather pants. She scanned the room for something to cover the top of her body. Clothing, books, and weapons littered the floor. No wonder she could never find anything. Her cottage was a mess. Should she find more leather? *No, this will do.* She finally located a white tunic. Pulling it over her head, she pictured Ophelia the last time she saw her.

She sat hunched over, hugging her arms to her chest, by the pond after she had snuck out of her father's manor house. She stared into the still water. Mae could see the fireflies reflecting on the surface. Dancing above and below the water. She looked at Ophelia sitting on the soft green grass at the edge of the water. Her skin glistening with sweat, goose flesh rising along her arms. She had clearly run, and she was shivering. Mae approached her slowly, a stick snapped underneath her boots. Ophelia

whipped her white hair around, pastel pink threaded through it in the moonlight, and started to cry immediately.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Mae enveloped her into a hug, sinking her knees into the wet grass. She could feel the cold seeping through to her skin. Ignoring her discomfort, she rubbed her friend's back, feeling Ophelia shake in her arms.

"It's... it's... my father..." Ophelia sobbed between deep breaths. "He's hiding something. Mae, I know it. I just know it! I can hear things at night. Thumps, screams and what sounds like a child... a child Maeva! Why is there a child?" She twisted her hands into Mae's shirt, her eyes pleading. "He says I'm going crazy. That my 'wretched curse' is finally taking me." Ophelia sobbed into Mae's shoulder.

"Lia," Mae said sternly, pulling the girl's chin up to look at her. "There is no curse. Your mother was mad, sure, but it is not a curse, and it can't be passed down to you."

Not like me. Mae thought to herself, an actual curse. Mae is a cambion, half human, half Daemon. Considered to be an actual curse on the Earth. Her parents left her alone a lot. Opting to let her discipline herself, out of fear perhaps, but she did not know. Fletcher took her under his wing, taught her everything she knew, everything she was now.

As Ophelia turned her eyes towards Mae, she could feel her heart in her chest. Her friend, her beautiful friend, tall and slender. Mae only came to her shoulder, only being able to hug her around the neck now because she was on the ground. A smoky tone complimented her golden skin, a trait given to her by her father, the only and most beautiful trait that evil man gave her. White hair, with a pink hue in the moonlight, fell down her back in beautiful waves, ending almost at her waist. Mae's breath hitched, as she realized that Ophelia wasn't just her friend. She wanted more. She inwardly scolded herself.

You've been burned by beautiful girls before. Besides, this was clearly not the thought to be having at this moment when Ophelia is in distress.

"I have to find out what is going on," Ophelia said, determination setting itself upon her delicate features, pulling Mae back to the real world. "He's hiding something. Something big. I know he is. I'm going to find out tonight" Mae was taken aback by the determination in Ophelia's voice. Her usually quiet and demure friend stood up, bold and strong.

"You can't. You know your father has that manor locked up tight. How are you going to get past the guards? They'll throw you in the tower for even questioning him. You think you're shunned now Lia? What is going to happen if he finds you snooping around the house? You'll be more than exiled! You'll be dead!" Mae shrieked, grabbing Ophelia's soft hand. Her father might have disliked Mae, may have hated her origin, but he truly despised Ophelia. He didn't see her as his daughter, as someone to love and love him like a family should. She was just a nuisance, and because she was a girl, she would never be able to rule Elecara. The royal line always had to be succeeded by male heirs. A tradition passed down through the family since its beginning when Venkalth was ruling. Ophelia's father demanded that her mother produce a boy.

'A proper heir,' he would say. 'Not like this girl you have brought into the world.'

Ophelia's mother very luckily gave birth to a male child not long after Ophelia. Her little brother, his sandy brown curls and dark chocolate eyes would make anyone fall in love with him. Lucien, he was named, her father claiming it was a powerful name. One that would command respect from the kingdom when it was his time to rule. He was showered with love and gifts all day and night. She, however, was left to fend for herself. Listlessly wandering the palace like a ghost. When her mother and brother passed, Ophelia's father withdrew into himself. He decided he could not look at her, the very sight of her making him sick with anger. He slowly started to go mad, snarling at his soldiers to pack up the young Ophelia, leaving her at the Manor house to live out her days. Ousted by the Kingdom, which now had no heir.

"I don't know, Mae, but I have to know what he's hiding. It's dangerous, sure. But I had to tell you, just in case I never see you again. I need someone to know what I'm doing."

"Lia... what are you talking about... I'll see you in the morning."

Ophelia stood up in one fluid motion, saying nothing, looking forlorn. She stared out over the pond in front of her. The difference between Mae and her friend was as clear as night and day. Ophelia was as poised as a dancer. She held her head high. Royalty will do that to you. Mae, on the other hand, was all muscle and mouth. She tripped over her own feet more than she would care to admit.

She watched as Ophelia made her way back to the manor house. Her shoulders were drooped, her arms hugged her waist. Mae hoped that this wouldn't be the last time she saw her. Wishing she had said the things that were on her mind just in case. She wanted to tell Ophelia that she was the only person who occupied her thoughts. The only person she wanted to spend her life with. To see her every morning, not just tomorrow. However, heartbroken once before, she held her tongue. Long after Ophelia had left, Mae sat quietly, staring into the soft ripples of the pond.

She stood up to leave, turning too quick and slamming her face into the ground.

"Wow, am I glad Ophelia left a while ago," she said to herself, picking herself up and dusting off. She walked off toward home.

That was three nights ago.

Another knock. More persistent this time.

"It's been four minutes, Mae. We can't wait any longer for you to try to pretty yourself up. Let's go," Kiel called through the door, sounding desperate now.

Mae whipped the door open, threats on her tongue for Kiel's sarcasm. She stumbled over her feet instead. Orion opened his wings to catch himself as Mae crashed to the ground. Ignoring her, he turned, settling back down. He drifted back to sleep *again*. Mae tried to right herself as quickly as possible and pulled on her boots. She grabbed the handle of the heavy wood door, slamming it behind her as she stepped out into the night.

She and Kiel sped along the cobblestone streets. No one was out at this hour, the streets eerily quiet, save for the occasional cat that crossed their path, and the occasional foot she had to avoid.

Drunks, she thought, mostly men, and the sporadic woman who couldn't make their way back home after a night of partaking at the tavern. She cursed herself for being so desperate and forgetting her cloak. The thin shirt she picked up off the floor doing nearly nothing to fend off the cold.

I may as well be naked. This is ridiculous. Winter was beginning to clasp the Kingdom in her cold fingers, soon snow would fall and there would be no warmth in the air for months.

Ophelia, she thinks to herself. She was starting to lose hope of ever seeing her again. She scrambled toward her friend. Fear constricting her chest again. She hoped against all odds that everything was alright, knowing it wouldn't be.

In one last desperate attempt at keeping the cold at bay, Mae turned her thoughts to that last fateful morning. The last time she saw Ophelia.



She remembered waiting on the docks that morning, listening to the ship crews bustling about. She could hear cargo being lifted onto boats, destined for whatever other kingdoms and towns needed it. It felt like a lifetime ago, not three days. The fog was thick all around. Obstructing her view of the sea before her. Closing her eyes, she pictured the water ahead of her. The sea collided with itself, one half a deep dark blue, the other a beautiful turquoise. She could feel the salt in the air. The faint acidic smell of Hell Water surrounding her.

Home.

The Kingdom of Elecara was surrounded by the sea, white sand disappearing beneath the waves. Dark blue-black waves crashed and raged on the shore on one side of the dock. Void of all life; no fish, no coral. Nothing thrived in the deep black waves. Calm turquoise waters on the other, lapping gently at the sand, a rainbow of sea creatures swam beneath the waves. Schools of fish caught her eye, their scales flashing silver. Hell Water, they called it, the blue-black waves. So cold it burned the life out of almost any creature. If a human encountered the water, no matter how small of an area of skin, they will meet their death. It will not be swift. It will feel warm at first, almost comforting. Within time, however, whatever skin was exposed would feel like a million fires are raging beneath it. A human would then freeze from the inside out. Drowned by the ice crystals that formed within their lungs. The waters would finally make their way to the heart, encasing it in crystalized ice, and stop it from beating forever.

There have been people who have disappeared from the Kingdom for years. Turning up on the white shore, a blue or gray tinge to their skin. Claimed by the Hell Water. Their loved ones sink to their knees in the sand, crying for their lost family.

The townsfolk would blame the offspring of Daemons, cambions. Making wild claims that cambions lured the townsfolk to the water to dance. Cambions were not affected by the waters. Daemons were created by the Lady of Darkness; they defied their orders when they came to the

mortal realm to spread their chaos. Stealing women to take their seed and bear their children. Many women felt this was a curse, to be chosen by these creatures, much like the child they now carried in their womb. Wailing in the temples built in the Lady's name, begging to know what they had done wrong to receive this punishment. Never getting an answer. Some women found it to be flattery, as there are always the few who love to dance with the devil. Despite their mothers' feelings about their existence, cambions were feared. If it was discovered that one was of Daemon descent, marked by their usual eye color, vibrant green, deep purple, or blood red, they would be shunned. People would cross the street when they passed. Shove their children behind their skirts. Some people even went so far as to shut doors in their faces.

"Monsters," they would sneer. Townsfolk would spit at them, wish the worst upon them, try to kill them. Most cambions led quiet lives, again however there are always the few who would turn to crime. Murder, assault, and theft ran rampant in the dark alleys of Elecara.

Mae chuckled to herself while she waited. Humans, she thought. They're no better. They think they are The Blessed Be. Why? Because there was no Daemon blood running through their veins, turning the blood almost black with ichor, because their lineage was untouched by hell?

However, Mae had seen the seedy underbelly of Elecara. When the King lost his son, and his wife, he went mad. In his anguish, he started kidnapping cambion children. Experimenting on them, no one knew what this entailed, only that these children were never seen again, forgotten by the mothers that brought them into this world.

"For the better." they would say. "They were already doomed from the start."

Ophelia, first born of King Balo and Queen Isabelle, a princess only by title. Despised by her own father, she had every right to turn on the world. However, instead of making herself bitter, she turned to kindness. She had never looked at the cambions as a lesser creature. She had never looked at Mae as less.

They met at the pond, two young girls, one of dark and one of light.

Mae was immediately drawn to the girl she saw before her. Her white hair, shining with a pink hue in the moonlight, waves cascading down her

back. Her head tipped back; her mouth was open in a wide smile as she laughed at something Kiel had said to her.

Of course, Kiel is making her laugh. She thought to herself. He was charming, and she could see that he was good looking. However, even at her young age, Mae knew that a man would not be who she spent her life with.

Cautiously, Mae approached, and the girl turned towards her, the most striking blue eyes landing upon her and pinning her to her spot. She stood there still as a statue. Kiel finally noticed that something was going on.

"Hey Mae!" Kiel called. "This is Ophelia."

Ophelia, Mae thought, the king's daughter? How? Everyone knew who she was. Of course they did. She was the daughter of the King. No one, however, knew what she looked like.

'Exiled,' they whispered. Kept away from view, no one had ever actually met the princess. Once upon a time, she was allowed to leave the palace with an escort, but that had been years ago. No one knew why she was no longer seen, though. There was speculation of course. That her mother betrayed her father and bedded another man, tried to ride off into the sunset with him. She was the unholy offspring of the union. Hated by her father, he locked her away, never letting her see the sunshine. Never allowing anyone to see her. Not one person knew that this was certain though, so why had her father kept her from everyone?

The Princess became something of a legend, a tale told before the hearth to keep kids from acting out.

'Behave or you'll end up just like the Princess.' Parents would tell their children. Whatever the reason for her father keeping her from the public, here she was sitting before Mae, looking as beautiful as the first spring rose. Even at thirteen years old, Mae could see the beautiful woman, young Ophelia would become. She was full of light and laughter; she was a beautiful person inside and out. She would grow even more lovely as she aged.

Ophelia stared at Mae, her eyes looking right into Mae's lack of a soul.

"Hi, it's nice to meet you," she said, smiling. That smile was what drew Mae in, holding onto her tight and never letting her go. She knew from then on that she would do anything for Ophelia, just as long as she asked for it. She didn't know at first what drew her to the princess, but she felt as if she needed to protect her. Ophelia could ask anything of her; she could

ask Mae to kill a man and Mae would drop everything to bury him. The princess, however, never took advantage of their friendship. Choosing to see Mae as an equal.

From that moment on, it had always been the two of them. The girl who looked like she was born of darkness itself and the girl who radiated like the sun. Kiel would join the two girls whenever he was not caring for his young siblings, but Mae and Ophelia were inseparable. They spent every moment they were able to together. Ten years she had seen Ophelia every day, every night. For ten years, she had fallen further and further in love with her. For ten years, Mae tried to squash her feelings down, swearing that being Ophelia's friend was much more important.

Ophelia grew into herself, tall and slender, her smoky bronze skin, golden like an early morning sunrise. Her white hair stayed wavy but continued to grow until it reached her waist. A stark contrast against her skin. Taking on a slightly pinker hue as she grew. She was everything Mae was not. Where Ophelia was light, Mae was darkness. Her ebony hair was a cacophony of curls. Bone pale skin veins so dark they looked purple, and curves to make a river jealous. Short in stature, she only came to Ophelia's shoulders. They were opposites, two sides of a coin, dark and light. Completely and utterly twined in each other's lives.

Mae was hopelessly in love with this girl, try as she might, and she tried. Choosing to remain her friend instead, she bedded as many women as she could get her fill of. Each one was worse than the last. However, no matter how awful Mae felt about herself the next morning, at least she wouldn't lose Ophelia.

Mae gazed out at the fog again and she lowered herself towards the water. Grazing her fingers along the surface and letting the Hell Water tickle her fingertips. She could see why the townsfolk thought cambions were responsible for the deaths. She could walk into the waters unharmed.

At least Ophelia doesn't treat me any differently for being a cambion. For something I can't control.

Watching the water swirl around her hand, causing her veins to stand out on her pale skin, she waited for Ophelia. Already dreading what she knew in her heart, Ophelia would not show up.



Coming out of her reverie, Mae sprinted towards the pond. There Ophelia sat, hunched over the edge. Her arms hugged her stomach. A mirror image of how Mae found her three nights before. Mae could see her tears dripping into the water from where she was, small ripples circling out from where Ophelia's tears hit the surface. Rushing towards her, she couldn't help but wonder what had happened to her friend. Ophelia turned towards her.

"Mae, it's worse than I feared. My father... he's... he's..." Ophelia trailed off her sobs becoming uncontrollable. Mae leaned into her friend, encircling her with her arms.

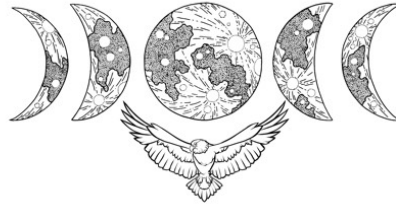
"He's what Ophelia? Rude? Inconsiderate? The most feared man in the Kingdom? Yeah... I'm aware. I can't even see you unless we sneak around."

"No Mae, it's worse than that. He's not just filled with despair over Lucien's death... he's bent on the Lady's destruction. All he wants is my brother back, he thinks by making the Lady of Darkness herself fear him, by making the whole of the afterworld tremble he'll get his dues. I don't know what his whole plan is, but he's taken..." holding her hand up to stop Ophelia so she can catch her breath, Mae turns as she hears rustling in the bushes along the water's edge.

A child stepped out from behind them. Mae hadn't even noticed her. Only having eyes for her friend.

"Mae, this is Róisín, The Daughter of the Moon and Sun."

Chapter Two



"Lia," Mae cautiously starts, looking at her friend. "Have you lost it? What are you going on about? The Daughter of the Moon and Sun? They're Gods! They don't *have* children. That's what we are. What *I* am. Cambions? Or did we suddenly forget that part? Did we forget that Daemons stole the women they deemed good enough? We're the children of the Sun and the Moon. Not this tiny... child!"

"Róisín," a small voice spoke up. "My name is Róisín." Mae turned to face the little girl before her, her tirade cut off. She looked to be about six, maybe seven. Standing a short four feet high, not that Mae was a good judge of who was short and who wasn't. The girl's pale face was full of defiance. Her flame red hair billowed out behind her, like it had a life of its own. Despite her dirty dark green dress and small bare feet, she had an air of authority that surrounded her. The child's eyes stared into Mae, looking right through her. In the deep of night, Mae could not tell their color. She only knew that they stared right into her, finding her secrets, trying to bring them to the surface. She squirmed under the child's stare, trying to keep her anger in check.

"Listen, Róisín, I don't know who you are. I don't know what you have said that makes Ophelia here think that you are the daughter of the Gods, but I'm not buying it." Mae waves her hand in the air, rolling her eyes so far back in her head she felt faint. "And Lia, you have to realize how insane this all sounds. She's a child, she's younger than Lucien was! Sure,

maybe she has suffered at your father's hands, but if she were the daughter of the Gods that would make her..."

"A Goddess?" Róisín finishes before Mae has a chance.

"Yes, a *Goddess*. There are quite literally two of them in all of existence. But yeah, sure little one, you're a Goddess and I'm the Mistress of the lake."

"You're much too crass to be the Mistress," the child stated in a flat voice.

"What even? By the Three Eyes child! Who even are you?" Mae kicked at the ground, a stone flying up, missing her face by a hair's breadth.

"How about instead of deciding what you already know, you let Lia and I explain it to you? We can go slow, because I can tell you right now that you don't even know the beginning of it, halfling."

"Halfling! I ought to leave just for that." Turning on her heel and stomping away, she could feel the red-hot ash of anger flare through her. Mae got no less than two steps before she heard Ophelia's voice stopping her short.

"Mae, please, just listen," Ophelia begged, using a soft voice. Mae looked at her, Ophelia's eyes pleading with her. She must truly believe that the story this child has concocted to be true. She could hardly deny Ophelia her request, and besides she just had to listen. She didn't have to believe.

"Fine," she sighed, "you have my attention." Turning to the child she continues, "And you better get started. It is far too late and much too early for me to be wading through a story full of absolute bullshit. Three eyes of the Lady, this better be good." Mae stood there waiting, tapping her foot and growing impatient. She loved Ophelia. She was family when her family was not, but she was tired. She wasn't prepared for what she was about to hear. It was Ophelia who began their story.



"As I told you the other night, I had been hearing things in the basement. Sounds like cracking whips, thumps that would hit the wall in the dead of night, a child's screams, a waking horror that interrupted my already awful nightmares. I know the whole kingdom had heard the rumors that my father has lost his mind completely. I suppose it is truer than not

by now. I know everyone has heard the stories of cambion children being taken from their mothers. Some were even young babies. These are not stories; they are very true. My father wants to rid the world of cambions. Why? I don't really know. He wants revenge on the Lady of Darkness. I assume that he feels if he tortures and kills Mother Moon's 'children', then she will relent and give him what he wants. He... he wants Lucien back." Ophelia stopped, her chest heaved with sobs for her little brother. Nine years without him had not completely healed the wound he left behind. Sure, they fought *a lot*, and he was a brat, but she still loved him.

Lucien was the only son of King Balo and Queen Isabelle, and the sole heir to Elecara. A mischievous young boy, the apple of his father's eye. His cherub face and rosy cheeks had the whole Kingdom smitten. His sandy brown curls and dark eyes captivated audiences as he told stories of dragons and mermaids. His short arms waved around animatedly. Lucien was the child of the Kingdom; he could probably get away with murder if he wanted to. He played pranks to keep himself occupied. Leaving eggs out for stable hands to step on or coaxing a maid to stick her hand in a bucket only to be met with ice cold jelly. He would skip off laughing about his jokes, the victim always chuckling as he ran off.

One morning he was not found in his chambers. His father had the whole court out looking for him within the hour. Every corner of the kingdom scoured, to find the boy prince. It was Ophelia who came upon him, having left the palace to join the search against her father's wishes. She ran over to her brother. He was lying on the white sand beach, his scrawny legs still half buried in the sea, burned from the inside out by Hell Water, the waves gently lapping at his knees like nothing had taken place. Balo, stumbled onto the beach after her. He let out a cry of anguish, sinking to his knees beside his daughter, barely sparing her a glance. He dragged Lucien out of the waves. Brushing the hair out of his face.

"My boy, my Lucien. Please wake up! Lucien!" A scream like a wild animal left his mouth before he dissolved into the most heart wrenching sobs heard in the entire Kingdom. Ophelia mourned that day. For her little brother, she would never see his smiling face again, never laugh as he entertained the court with his stories. Tears slipped down her face.

Ophelia's mother had disappeared the day Lucien passed away. Ophelia had not even seen her that morning looking for her son. The townsfolk assumed the worst, that she had purposely drowned the boy. That she

wanted to cause ruin to the people of Elecara. The rumor said she regretted her decision and unable to deal with her own anguish she in turn took her own life. People would whisper, Ophelia would hear her father as he used to tell his soldiers what the kingdom was saying, that they saw her mother, iron shackles about her wrists and ankles as she walked into the sea to let the Hell Water take her as well. Mae could see Ophelia steel herself against the sadness, wanting to flow out of her. She continued.

"I snuck down to the basement during the changing of the guards. I had to know what was really going on. Did my father really have children down there? Why children? What did they do? It's not their fault they were born of Daemons. Did he think that the Lady of Darkness would be more inclined to meet his demands if he tortured innocent boys and girls?"

I stumbled through the dark. Why was there no light down here? It was very disorienting. I finally made it to a huge wooden door, stumbled over it really because it was sunk into the floor. It took me what seemed like eons to wrest the lock open. All the while thinking to myself

"I wish Mae was here. I could use her lock picking skills." Ophelia snickered under her breath, a small smile on her lips, not reaching her eyes through the anguish. Mae shot daggers at her with her eyes.

"It's well known in the kingdom that Mae is cambion, and bored. She is the daughter of wealthy parents, who never paid her much mind." Mae saw the child, Róisín, glance at her, completely bored with the explanation. She studied her small hands instead. Almost as if she already knew everything there was to know about Mae. Ophelia, oblivious to them, continued.

"With nothing to do and no one to look out for her, except Fletcher, who... let's be honest, Mae, he runs the underground of Elecara, he's not exactly a role model." Mae gasped, glaring again, she felt her anger flare as she quickly tried to tamp it down. Ophelia knew Fletcher was like a father to her. Mae's gasps were ignored as Ophelia continued, "She took to living like a common thief. Pick-pocketing for sheer entertainment. She is a whiz with a lock pick and can get any door in the Kingdom open in seventeen seconds flat. I timed her once," Ophelia explains to Róisín.

"Not the point of this story I assume, Lia. Let's continue, *please*," Mae chided. "And don't think I'm just going to forget what you said about Fletcher," she said under her breath. Ophelia flashed her another sad smile.

"Anyway, I finally got the door open and facing me was a set of stairs. Stairs? I was in the basement already. A pitch-black tunnel, looking like it

may lead straight to Hell itself. Sucking in a breath and tasting the stale air, I descended, wondering if I was about to come face to face with the Lady herself. Little did I know how wrong I was. How much worse it was about to get.

At the bottom of the stairs, I could feel the room open. A cavernous space around me, my breaths coming back to me as they bounced off the walls. I hugged my arms around myself to try to keep the chill at bay. Hearing the drip of water, I pictured where I would be if I were above ground, thinking I must be about where the bridge passes over the river that goes through our property. That must have been why I heard water. The constant drip was enough to drive anyone mad. Beyond that, however, I could hear soft sobs, like a kitten that was abandoned by its mother. A tragic sound, really, almost pathetic. Shaking my head to dispel the thought I just had about Hell, I pushed forward, unsure of what I was walking into but needing to know. My eyes were starting to adjust to the dim room about me and I could see a darker shape in the wall that must be a doorway to another part of this hellish prison.

Stepping through the threshold, I found myself in a smaller, damper room. The smell of wet stone assaulted my nose, along with the smell of an unwashed body. I heard the rustling of chains and a small voice.

'Don't hurt me again, please, I can't help you, I don't know anything... I just want to go home. Where's my mama? Please.'

Mama? There are no mothers here. What is going on? I followed the sobs until I was standing in front of a tiny child. She was curled in on herself. Her flame red hair streaked with dirt. Her fingernails bloody from clawing at what I could only assume was the floor or the wall, trying to escape. Later I would realize this was my father, pulling off this poor child's fingernails until all that was left behind were bloody stumps. I could see manacles around her wrists which were raw and blistered from her trying to escape. Silvered iron? I could now see the sheen of them in the dim light. Why was Silvered Iron being used? Unless...

The child then blinked out of my eyesight. Only to reappear flickering and sobbing harder than before.

'Please, please don't hurt me. I don't know anything; I can't help you. Let me go, please. I just want to go home!'

'Sweetheart, I'm not here to hurt you. What in the Prince's Light are you doing down here? Who are you?'

Two of the most interesting eyes peered up at me then. This small child, she couldn't be more than six, maybe seven stared at me. Her eyes, one the deepest onyx, bottomless and ready to swallow me whole, the other the brightest gold I have ever seen. Her moon pale skin seemed to almost glow, as if light was running through her veins. It was the only light source in the damp cell. I had to call it a cell. No one was even chained against a wall in a damp stone room unless it was a cell.

I could sense the distrust in her. It came off her in waves, and I did not blame her one bit. I wouldn't trust anyone coming down here if I were chained.

'Who am I?' she spoke now with authority, standing as best as she could and puffing her chest out at me. 'Who are you?' She spat at my feet.

Feisty, I thought to myself. Was the sobbing from before an act? It couldn't have been. She didn't even know I was here. Someone had to break the tension, though.

'I am Ophelia, Princess of Elecara.' I offered my hand to her.

'You're his daughter!' The child skidded away, the fear creeping back into her voice. No, earlier was not an act. She was clearly scared of something, or someone, I thought darkly.

'Sweetheart, I am only his daughter by title, but I can assure you he wishes I didn't exist. Now, please. What did he do to you?'

She ignored me though, creeping back, so she was sitting up against the wall. I saw her body flicker dark, then light, over and over. I waited. I knew I would have to let her come around to me. After what felt like years, the child spoke to me again, distrust lacing her words.

'I'm Róisín, Daughter of Moon and Sun, heiress to the Heavens and Afterworld.'

No, no, this wasn't real.

'The Moon and The Sun? The Lady of Darkness, and the Prince of the Sun? Sweet child I don't know what they have done to you here, but the Gods do not have children. I don't even think that they can have children.'

How would a Goddess of Death create life, anyway? I thought to myself, but continued aloud to the girl,

'That is what cambions are, as hated as they are. They are the children of the Gods.'

'I am aware of cambions, princess, the halfling beasts spawned by my mother's Daemons. They are no more children of the Gods than a rat is

mother to a fox. However, it is clear to me that I am no longer talked about through younger generations. Useless. Were I not the daughter of the Gods would I be able to do this?' Again, she flickered in my vision, almost disappearing entirely. Gasping, she came back into full view, blood pooling beneath her eyes. Crying out, she pulled against her shackles.

Maybe she was telling the truth. Only Silvered Iron would keep a God in place. Render their powers almost useless. Something about the silver in the iron that made the Gods tremble. She never bothered to learn about it because she never planned to use it. Once her father had passed, Elecara would never mine the North again. Never.

'What did you just do?' I asked her, keeping the rest of my thoughts to myself. The girl ignored my question.

'Let me ask you princess...'

'Ophelia, my friends call me Lia.'

'Okay, Lia.' the child, Róisín, bared her teeth at me, pulling on her restraints again. I could only imagine what she would try to do to me were she free of her shackles.

'What do you get when the Moon blocks the Sun?' The girl peered at me. Her onyx eye dug into my head.

'An eclipse?' I replied, feeling uneasy. The question seemed out of place for the situation I found myself currently in.

'And what is an eclipse, but a shadow?'

A shadow? Is that what just happened? She disappeared, but not quite. Blending in with the darkness surrounding her. Well, that still didn't mean she was a Goddess... a sorceress, perhaps? I had heard that women with magic lived outside the Kingdom.

'That is... interesting, okay Róisín, let's say I do believe you. Let's say you are a Goddess and not a sorceress or something else. Why are you shackled under my house? You're what? Six? Seven? What could my father possibly want with you?'

'My mother,' the child simply stated.

'Your mother? So... The Lady of Darkness? The Mother Moon? But why child? What could he possibly gain with you?' The uneasiness I felt earlier returned with a vengeance. Coupled with the smell of dirt and the damp feel of the room I started to feel sick.

'He wants her to suffer for your brother. He believes that my mother stole your brother. That she saw him along the shore and decided she

wanted another child of her own... one to replace...' She stops short and folded her arms across her chest. A single tear rolled down her cheek, wisping away as it dripped off her chin. 'He plans to tear apart the threads of the Afterworld to find him.' Her chin trembled again. She curled in on herself against the cold wall. Shuddering breaths left her tiny body.

My brother. Lucien. Of course, that's what he wanted. It's all he's ever wanted.

"So, we escaped," Ophelia finished, making it sound like it was a simple hop and skip out of the basement. A curtsy past the guards, out of the Manor, through the woods, find Kiel, and meet everyone at the pond. Ophelia held her hand out to Róisín, the child holding steadfast onto her fingers. Mae looked aghast. She felt her mouth gaping open and closed. Her eyes were as wide as saucers. Momentarily at a loss for words.

The Daughter of the Moon and Sun? Could it be real? Could there really be a child Goddess? A child of the Gods... what would that even mean for the realm?

"I'm still not buying it," she stated.

"Believe it now, thief?" Mae let out a yelp as Róisín appeared behind her. She hadn't even seen the child move.

"I am not a thief. Not anymore," she trailed off quietly.

"Ahh yes, of course. The young Maeva, a cambion, first born of Martin and Lucille, or should I say Lucille and some Daemon who thought she looked like a tasty treat. Her blonde hair and hazel eyes must have drawn it in, or maybe her curves. Either way, you're not really your father's daughter, are you? You have six brothers, all of them the pride of your parents, and you the outcast because of your mother's betrayal. Little halfling Maeva who's in love wi-..."

"Enough!" Mae bellowed, causing Róisín to stop in her tracks, her taunting cut off abruptly.

"My mother did *not* betray my father; I was forced into her belly. It is not her *fault*. It's mine... or his, whoever. Not hers though," Mae seethed. The edges of her vision turned red in anger.

"Who is Mae in love with?" Kiel quipped from a large rock he was lounging on, blue smoke trailing into the dark sky. Mae stared at him in disbelief. Some of her anger fading as she looked to the man she considered a brother. His pale hair fell over his forehead, his eyelids closed over his deep brown eyes. He looked utterly at ease after hearing

the story Ophelia had just told them. His feet were propped up against a large pine tree, his lithe, but muscular body sprawled out. His fingers held his cigarette lazily as he slowly opened his eyes and winked at Mae.

"That doesn't concern you, Kiel, cause it's not you," she stammered, trying to hold in a laugh that was trying to bubble up in her chest. "Now Lia, please explain to me what this has to do with me? In the middle of the night? In the almost winter? Without a cloak." Mae turned toward her friend, hands on her hips, waiting.

"We have to reunite The Moon and The Sun with the Shadow and Flame," Ophelia replied.



"Reunite? The Moon and Sun? With the Shadow and Flame?" Mae asked slowly, emphasizing each word. What did that even mean? Sure, the child in front of her had some impressive powers, but perhaps like Ophelia had mentioned, she was a sorceress.

"Do you know how asinine this all sounds, Ophelia? Even if everything you are saying is true, and who's to say it is? That girl right there? Not likely. How do you suggest we find the Afterworld? How do we go about getting an audience with the Lady? 'Knock, knock, hey just wanted to let you know we found your child. Thanks, see you later?' Are you sure this *child* is a Goddess? Not some cambion who learned a few tricks? Not some sorceress who crawled out of the river determined to play games with the princess who never gets to feel the sun on her skin?" Mae's distrust laced every word as she glared at the child in front of her. She huffed and looked around her. The kingdom was silent, no lamps flickering in windows. Even the cats and the drunks seemed to have gone quiet. She looked to the sky, stars splattering against the midnight sky. She was cold. The temperature seemed to be dropping by the minute. Mae could see the tears forming in Ophelia's eyes. She'd gone too far, she knew it, but she was tired, confused, and surprisingly hungry. She couldn't stop the words from flooding out.

"Now, now, thief..." Róisín began standing beside Ophelia.

"I. Am. Not. A. Thief. *Child*."

"Nor am I a child, as you seem to be convinced. Though I am small in stature, my age could put you to shame. My mother and father are ageless,

created with the stars and the Afterword long ago. Mama was the first. She was unaware that another had ever been created. However, she has never been one to let the borders of the Afterworld keep her in one place. She would wander as far as she could, walking her realm. She saw my father from afar one day and, determined to meet him, followed him home. They fell in love, and I was conceived of starlight and sunbeams. Their child, their Shadow. Despite the *child* you see before you, I promise you; I am centuries old. I have seen more than you will in this lifetime and the next."

"I'm still not convinced," Mae scoffed.

"Maybe this will change your mind," Ophelia said quietly, removing a rolled-up parchment from her satchel. "I found this in my father's chamber before discovering Róisín."

"His chamber! Lia! You could have gotten yourself killed. Why would you go in there?" Instead of answering her, Ophelia thrust the parchment at her. Reaching for the brittle paper Mae slowly unrolled it. She thought it would fall apart in her hands.

It is said that the Moon was in love with the Sun, and the Sun was in love with the Moon.

The first line began, the last thing the parchment said was:

Reunite the Moon and Sun with their Shadow and Flame, for this is how we flourish once again.

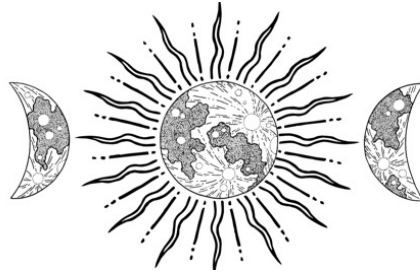
Mae read the words in front of her and then read them again. After a third read through, she realized that what Ophelia said was true. If only a little bit. At least... that perhaps the Gods did have a child. Whether it was *this* child was left up for debate. Breathing deep and closing her eyes, she let her chest deflate slowly.

"Alright," she sighed, "what do we do?" She was stuck. Ophelia was asking her to believe, so believe she would try. Ophelia leapt up and threw her arms around Mae.

"Thank you," she whispered, giving her a kiss on the cheek, her eyes misting with tears. She embraced her friend, her mind reeling at the information she had been given.

"Don't wander too far, Kiel. Might need one of your cigarettes sooner rather than later," Mae said, leading the group back to her cottage.

The Lady of Darkness



Drip, drip, drip.

The insistent dripping was starting to drive her mad. Would it ever end? She pulled at her binds again in a futile attempt to escape. Trying in vain to pull them off her when melting her skin did not work. She could feel the skin was ragged where her fingernails had broken. Although she could not see it, she could feel the sticky black blood running down her fingers. Dripping off the tips and hitting the floor *plip, plip, plip*. The metallic smell like rust assaulted her nostrils, making her gag. Her wrists were rubbed raw from the Silvered Iron holding her in place. She imagined the dark scabs braceleted her skin. She was going to disappear here. No longer would she stand beside her lover. Never again would she see her family. Despair surrounded her, clawing at her throat, threatening to drown her on land.

How did it come to this? She sighed to herself. *A Goddess struck down by a mere human. How is it even possible?* She wracked her brain, trying to piece together that fateful morning.



"Mama, mama!" Róisín gleefully called to her across the garden. "Look!" She made her way over to her daughter. Running her fingers over the soft petals of the rosebush as she passed. Their fragrance surrounding her, tangy and sweet. The deep red blooms were protected by the thorns.

Just as she vowed to keep her own little shadow rose safe. The plush grass beneath her feet comforted her as she wandered over to Róisín. She peered down at her child, seeing pure delight in her deep eyes. The little Goddess danced around.

"Yes, my love, you're getting better." Pride swelled in her bosom. Her daughter was the best of both her and her lover.

"Here mama, this is for you!" Róisín handed her a beautiful rose, smoke curling from the petals. She ran her hand over it, realizing it was made of shadows. The petals disappeared and reformed around her fingers. Feeling like a cool kiss across her knuckles.

"My darling! This is beautiful. Your powers are growing. Remember the more you practice the better you will get.

One day it is you who will rule the realms. You have the sun and the moon inside of you, my child. You will be a fair and just ruler."

Róisín smiled again at her, her onyx and gold eyes flashing. She grabbed her mother's hand. Her tiny hand felt soft against her skin.

"Come on mama! I want to make something for papa."

Following her daughter through the door and into the palace, she felt pure happiness. It had been worth everything to get here. Her thoughts darkened as she remembered the malevolent Goddess she had been before she had met her Prince. She was lost; she was angry, and she hated the mortals. Convinced they did not worship her as they should, each and every one of them who stepped into her realm deserved to be punished. Shaking her head to dispel her dark thoughts, she rushed to meet Róisín.

Sighing again, she tried to grab the cloth bound around her three eyes again. The rough fabric was rubbing the skin around her eyes. She could feel the blisters forming. Her arms would not reach the cloth, she fell back into the damp stone walls, instead she pictured her home.

The gilded palace that sat atop a mountain. Fog so thick around its foundation it appeared to be sitting in the clouds. Golden gates inlaid with gems opened to black and gold marbled floors. Obsidian towers clawed their way toward the sky, disappearing into the clouds. She wished it was humbler, a home. This is where she ruled from though, her lover the Prince of the Sun at her side. His polished bronze skin and blazing eyes that looked like a sunset complimented her pale skin and black eyes. His hair that looked as if it was made of the Sun itself, a wheat field kissed by the sunrise, was the opposite of her black hair that was threaded with starlight

when she was Mother Moon but took on a life of its own when rage encompassed her, snaking around her when she was The First Goddess. Her opposite in every way. Where he was a gentle ruler, she was brutal, as one must be when judging the humans who have passed to the Afterworld. Balanced.

She could feel the ache in her chest. She missed him so much. A hole of despair opened around her. She felt herself being pulled into the dark thoughts, feeling as though she would never see him again. She drifted back to memories of that morning with Róisín.

They were in the library; she was listening to Róisín read from one of the many leather-bound books. A story about a girl and a wolf and a ridiculous sounding grandmother. She heard a crash and screams in the distance. The library's door burst open and in came one of the guards.

"My Lady, we must go now! There's been a breach. They're coming for you." He was frantically waving his arms toward the door. Trying to usher her and Róisín out. She laughed at the guard.

"Dear sir, are you confused as to who I am? Let them come. Nothing they do can stop me."

She was foolish. She was her own demise.

"Run while you still can!" the guard pleaded, turning and running back through the door as another crash sounded far off in the palace.

"Mama?" Róisín squeaked behind her, "Mama, what's goi..." The library's walls shook and imploded on themselves. Debris flew everywhere, momentarily blinding her. As the smoke settled, she saw soldiers dressed in the colors of Elecara, silver and red. A leviathan hammered into the armor on their chest.

"MAMA!" Róisín screamed while a guard barreled down on her. The man towered over her daughter. The sneer on his face screamed at the hatred that had bled into his heart. She could feel the anger washing off the soldier in waves. It fed her. She felt her image shift toward the malicious Lady of Darkness.

"Róisín!" She reached towards her daughter, but it was too late. A figure stepped out of the settling dust. The King of Elecara, Balo, picked his way over fallen pieces of the library's walls, making his way over discarded books he put his hand upon Róisín's shoulder. She seemed to slump over. Her screams cut off abruptly.

"What do you want!" She turned to the king, her pale skin melting to reveal pure black obsidian bones underneath. Her hair started taking on a life of its own.

"Enough with the dramatics, My Lady," Balo sneered. "I've already got your child; do you really think that you're in a place to be throwing punches?"

Glancing over at her poor daughter again, she sighed. Returning to the image of the Mother Moon.

"What do you want, Balo?" she asked again.

"You know what I seek, My Lady." He snarled at her, baring his teeth like a wild animal.

"You seek what cannot be returned, Balo. Your son perished in Hell Water. I cannot undo what has been done. I cannot return a soul to the realm of the living. If I made an exception for Lucien, if I even could, I would have the entire mortal realm requesting to meet with me. Begging for their loved ones back. It simply cannot be done."

"An eye for an eye, then," he said, signaling to one of the soldiers. Róisín was lifted onto his shoulder like a rag doll. The Lady cried out. Reaching again toward her daughter "And I think I'll take the Mother as well. Maybe you will change your tune after spending some time with nothing but your thoughts," he said, throwing something at her feet.

The glass exploded, and a golden smoke surrounded her. It smelled faintly of blood. The library began to swim before her. The books and volumes melding together until they were just a blur of color. She felt a crack as her head hit the floor and everything went black.

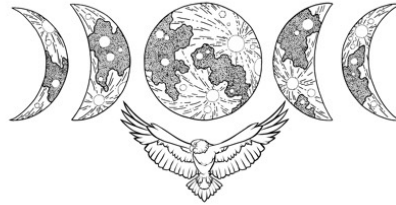
She woke up here. Her daughter missing, an overwhelming sadness settling in that she would never see her again, never see her lover again. Her heart felt heavier with every heave of her chest. She remained curled in on herself for ages.

This is enough! she chastised herself. Remember who you are! You are a Goddess! You are the Goddess! Enough of this self-pity.

She leaned back against the wall. Letting a long breath out into the black. She was alone.

Just her and this infuriating drip.

Chapter Three



Mae looked around her small cottage. It was cozy. The living area had two oversized chairs and a comfy divan. So plush you could sink into them. The perfect spot for reading a good book or spending a night with your friends. A large hearth at one end of the room, a fire roaring inside, its heat chasing away the chill in her bones. The smell of burning wood was a comfort to her. It grounded her, reminded her that she was still alive. She looked at the people under her roof. Her family: Ophelia, Kiel and Orion, and the child who said she was a Goddess. Soft murmurs traveled to her ears while they tried to come up with a plan.

She slid in beside Kiel.

"Kiel, you know you can always stay here, right? You can stay at the cottage; you don't have to make this trek. I need someone to watch over the place anyway... I don't want it to burn down or anything." Mae looked toward him, raising an eyebrow.

"You're fucking joking, right? By the Lady, Mae, this is the most interesting thing I've been a part of. Also, you know... since you love me and all, I figured I should join you, keep you safe. Knight in shining armor, all that stuff of children's tales."

Mae smacked Kiel's shoulder, a little harder than she meant to. Smiling at him as he winced and rubbed his probably already forming bruise.

"You know I'm not in love with you, right? That I..." she asked sincerely, leaving the rest unsaid her eyes wandered over to Ophelia.

"Yes Mae." Kiel rolled his eyes back in his head. "You don't really hide your feelings as well as you think. You have been pining after her since I can remember. She might be the only one who hasn't figured it out yet, or she's a very good actress. At least, I have figured it out because I am obviously the smart one. Besides the point, you are like a little sister to me, so I'm coming."

"A little sister," she scoffed, "we're the same age, Kiel! You're only two months older than me! I'm barely little."

"Exactly twenty-three, plus two more months of experience than you. I am old and wise. As for little..." He winked at her, setting his elbow upon her head. "Five foot one, definitely tall, dark and gorgeous."

Mae giggled to herself, shooing Kiel's arm off her head. They turned to Ophelia and Róisín, their heads bent together, the white and black mixing together. They were whispering quietly to each other, speaking fast. Mae only caught a word here and there. *Map, forest*, but she couldn't hear much else. Orion slept soundly in Róisín's lap; head tucked under his wing.

Traitor, Mae thought to herself.

"Alright ladies," Mae sings, " what's the plan for your grand adventure? We better get going before the door bursts in and your father's soldiers are on us. We've all read the stories. That's how it happens, right? So, how can we avoid that inconvenience?"

Gaping at her, Ophelia stumbles over her words.

"Well, uh, okay. First no. That's not *how it happens*, but you are right, we do not have a lot of time. My father will have noticed Róisín missing, if he hasn't already, then it will be very soon." She pulled a torn map out of her satchel and flattened it out on the table. The parchment was stained and faded. Mae thought she could see water, perhaps the outline of Elecara.

"We need to go here," she said, pointing to a spot on the map.

"To that wine stain?" Mae quipped.

"Would you be quiet, thief?" Róisín glared at Mae, who sat down beside Ophelia. Mae shot a glare back at Róisín

"I am not a thief! Three eyes, would you lay off it *child*?"

"I am not..." Róisín starts, quickly interrupted as Mae breezes by her to sit beside Ophelia.

"Okay, Lia, what's here? It's blank on the map," Mae starts gently. She gestures to the spot on the map. Blank save a circle of deep red. Upon

closer inspection, Mae realized it wasn't wine but dried blood.

"That's where we go to get to the Afterworld." Ophelia started, taking a long, slender needle out of her satchel.

"Lia?" Mae spoke her name cautiously. "What are you doing with that?" Mae watched, confusion marring her face as Ophelia pricked her finger. Confusion melted away to panic. "Lia! What are you doing with that?" Mae cried again. She reached forward to grab the needle, as crimson blood welled on the tip of Ophelia's finger. No words were spoken. She just stared forlornly at Mae as she let a few drops fall to the map.

"Just... trust me, please?" Ophelia begged, her words quiet, a whisper in the dark night. The blank parchment slowly transformed before Mae's eyes; what she had considered a wine stain was, in fact dried blood. Mae wondered how many times Ophelia had done this before. She had never shared anything like this with her before. The blank space pops and crackles, revealing a map. Now, not empty, it showed a river. Mae stared wide-eyed. A flutter of nerves went through her belly.

"What is this Lia?" Concern filled her, threatening to boil over into fear.

"This... is where The Keeper will be waiting for us, okay? Maybe not specifically for *us*, but he will be waiting. Every thirteen days, he takes the souls of the deceased to face judgment in front of the Lady of Darkness and the Prince of the Sun. We need to be there on the shore. As of now, there are four days until the souls have to wait a long thirteen days again." Ophelia explained and tore her eyes away from the map. She turned to them; Mae was at a loss for words. Fortunately, Kiel jumped in.

"So, what is the plan, then? Certainly, you've got one, right?" Kiel asked.

"We do," Róisín stated, spinning around to face Kiel and Mae. "We go through Varanstalle." Her small stature made taking her seriously a tough task.

"Varanstalle, the enchanted forest? Seriously? Do you know what is in there?" Mae inquired. Skepticism colored her features.

"Of course, I do. I put them there. They're born from the moon," Róisín said, with a sly grin and a wink.

"You put them there? Róisín they're wolves! Eight-foot-tall ones at that! What in the Prince's Light were you thinking?" Ophelia looked at her, her eyes wide in shock.

"I was a child then," she replied, as if that was the only explanation needed. Ophelia stared at her stunned.

"Okay, wolves aside, what about the Reaper Riders?" Mae inquired, again. Reaper Riders were creatures of legend. No one knew their purpose, but if a person stepped foot in the enchanted forest, they usually didn't come out. If they did, they were never the same. Turning cruel and living a life of crime.

"The Reapers died out a long time ago. It was wolves I heard." A conspiratorial grin crossed her face.

"Anyway, the wolves won't be bothering us. So, through Varastalle, we have to locate the gate on the other side of the Whispering Valley. That is where we will find The Keeper. He comes to the shore at the Darkrael River for the souls of the deceased."

"Darkrael?" It was Kiel this time, uneasiness in his voice, "a river of..."

"Hell Water, yes" Róisín interrupted, her voice flat. Mae could see the child was tired of explaining.

"Do you know that half of us in this room will be burned from the inside out if we put a toe in that river? Not to mention feathers over here will be nothing but a good meal."

"Orion!" Mae said, as Orion screeched and lunged for Kiel.

"Sorry, not to mention Orion also will not survive that river."

"It is fine, Kiel; no harm will come to us. I assure you by my mother herself. You will survive."

"Sounds like the easiest thing I've done in my life. Walk in the park." Mae jumps down from the table and heads over to Orion. "As long as Ri's with us, we shouldn't need to worry about getting lost."

"This little guy?" Róisín purred at Orion, scratching under his neck. "Of course, he's the strongest little eagle I've ever seen."

Taking offense to the word *little*, Orion puffed his feathers. With a screech and a whirlwind, he grew to seven feet tall. He fluffed out his wings, knocking over an oil lamp. The flames doused by the fall, but the smell of kerosene permeated the room.

"Ri!" Mae chided. "You know better than to show off. I *know* what you are capable of. I could have just explained."

Orion clawed at the polished wood floors, leaving behind long talon marks. Mae frowned as he let out a chirp that implied he did not believe Mae capable of explaining him to anyone.

"*Unbelievable!* She gives you one chin scratch and suddenly we're all about Ró are we? I bring you treats, you ungrateful fowl. I should dump you in Varanstalle! Leave you to the wolves."

"Did you just call me Ró?" The shadow child peered up at Mae, interrupting her rant.

"Yeah, I uh, yeah I guess I did. Sorry, Tiny Lady? Miss Shadow Moon? Do you have a formal title? I didn't mean to offend you or anything." Mae could feel the heat of embarrassment crawling up her cheeks. She imagined they were colored a very bright scarlet.

"Slow down please, Mae." Róisín smiled, it was the first time Mae had seen her do so. "I like it, thank you, I've... never had a special name before." Just like that, there was an uneasy trust between Mae and the small Shadow Child.



They didn't pack much. What could they pack? You can't take it with you to the Afterworld they said.

Food: dried fruits and cured meats, typical things that wouldn't spoil, all went into packs. Mae snuck in some cheese. If she was going to be away from home, she might as well have a food she enjoyed. She popped a piece of brie into her mouth, savoring the flavor as it melted on her tongue. She filled and packed water skins, two per person. Hopefully, they wouldn't have to stop for more. Water was hard to come by, two small rivers running through the kingdom being the only sources of freshwater. She was unsure what they would find outside of Elecara, but she didn't want to take any chances. Weapons, they would need as many as they could carry. Mae was trying to decide between her long sword or her crossbow, three daggers already strapped to her hip, thigh, and left forearm, respectively. She stood and looked around her small cottage. There wasn't much to it, but it was home. She looked to the small eating area. It looked as though it had been ransacked in their hurry to pack. The wood of the walls had splatters of fresh fruit that Mae had tossed behind her, discarding anything that would spoil.

"Mae," she heard a small voice behind her, turning to see Róisín pulling at her arm.

"What's up little Ró."

"It's Ophelia. I am very worried about her. She is rather distraught after learning what her father had done. I don't want her to get hurt. There's something about her I can't put my finger on. She's important, though. I can take care of myself; our priority should be making sure Ophelia makes it through this journey." Taken aback at the sincerity coming from this little shadow, she smiled down at her.

"You've got nothing to worry about Ró, I've been protecting Lia for years now. Between Orion and I she will be safe."

"And your friend, Kiel?" Róisín inquired. "He seems like a liability. We should have him stay here."

"Believe me, if I could make him stay I would. He seems to think *I* need protecting." She laughed, gesturing to the weapons she had. "As if he could protect me more than these things. He won't listen to reason. He's loyal to a fault. Feel free to try, though."

"I think I will," came the reply, as Róisín turned on her heel and stalked toward Kiel. Mae watched as Róisín sat down on the plush maroon chair across from Kiel. Turning back to her weapons she ran her finger along the blade of her long sword. A bead of blood rising along her finger and dripping onto the floor seeping into the grain. She decided she would bring it with her. Its weight would not be a hindrance. She just prayed she wouldn't trip over it while they walked. Looking towards her crossbow, she was contemplating whether she could also carry it with her and still have room for the rest of her provisions. Ultimately deciding yes, she would make it work, when she heard yelling behind her.

"You just met them!" Kiel cried out. "I've known them for almost half their lives! I've been there through everything for these two! You've known Lia for what? Two days! You don't know the first thing about them! I'm coming. I'm protecting them!" His voice rose octaves with his anger.

"Have you ever held a sword, Kiel? A crossbow? Have you ever shot one? I've known you for a couple hours and I know you're a jokester. Everything is funny to you!"

"Don't even Róisín! I may not know how to swing a sword well, and no I've never killed anyone. Neither have those two and I can tell you right now, you're going to be wishing for my commentary when everyone's spirits are down! *I. Am. Coming.* They are my family!" Rushing over Mae grabbed Kiel's collar and hauled him up.

"Walk it off Kiel." She directed him toward the door, twisting the black iron knob.

"No Mae. This is too far. I'm coming with you. This *child* has no say." Kiel shook with anger. Mae had never seen him so angry.

"This doesn't concern you, human." Róisín spat at him, flinging around so fast Mae couldn't keep track of her. She stood up on her tiptoes, her short height suddenly not seeming so small anymore. "This is dangerous. Not some trip to the pub with your mates to get drunk and try to slip a busty maid your Prince's given gift."

"Excuse me!" Kiel roared. "How dare you!" He stomped out the door, slamming it shut behind himself. The door rattled on its hinges as the room grew loud in the awkward silence that followed.

"*Okaaay*, that was uncalled for Róisín." Mae looked at the girl who crossed her arms defiantly across her chest. She knelt down beside the girl, Mae put her arm around Róisín's slight shoulders. "I get it, I really do. I don't want him coming with us either, maybe not for the same reason as you, but I don't want him hurt. He really does mean well, though. He is a big brother through and through. He's always going to protect us." Mae let out a long sigh before she continued. She knew how upset Kiel was. He would never settle for being left behind. She knew she would be the same way. Mae also wanted to lighten the mood. It had become stifling in her small cottage. Instead of trying to convince Róisín that Kiel was coming, she said, "You upset him, you know? From what I've heard, he has a pretty impressive gift. You can't deny him protecting his family and wound his pride at the same time." Mae attempted a smile, and felt it growing as Róisín returned the expression.

"I'll go talk to him," Ophelia said, standing up. "You two finish getting supplies, *with enough for Kiel*," she said with a pointed look at Róisín.

Sighing, Róisín picked up another sack of dried fruit and started distributing it between four packs against her better judgment, murmuring to herself about,

'Ridiculous humans and their ridiculous loyalties.'

"Listen Ró." Mae stuffed supplies into bags as she spoke, a last ditch effort to convince the Goddess that Kiel was going to be an asset. "Kiel really does mean well. It's been the three of us for a long time. Lia's father has never loved her, and we really don't know why. My parents don't even think about me. They've let me run amuck since I was a child myself. I

grew up on the streets, even though I had a warm bed and a roaring fire to return to every night. I was forged in the back alleys of Elecara. You call me a thief, but that's all I had for guidance." She peered over at Róisín who was staring at her with pity in her bi-colored eyes.

"I'm sorry," Róisín whispered, Mae saw a tear slip down her pale skin, wisping off her chin. Her eyes were downcast, staring intently at the wooden floor; remorse wound its way over Róisín's figure, hunching her shoulders. It felt like time had stopped. Hours seemed to have passed before she looked up again. Her bi-colored eyes bore into Mae.

"Don't. Don't look at me with pity. It's fine. I'm *fine*. Anyway, Kiel is the only one of us with a proper family. A loving father and doting mother, three younger sisters and two younger brothers. His parents really did right by him. He's a protector. He always made sure Lia and I knew we had someone in our corner. Really. He knows how to make sure someone is aware that people care for them. I don't like it just as much as you do, maybe even more, that he wants to join us. He and Lia are my only real family." She felt something press into her back, sharp and stinging. "Ow! Yes, fine, my only real *people* family, Orion." She rolled her eyes and gave the bird a scratch under his beak. Turning back to Róisín she finished, "However, that's Kiel, like I said. Loyal to a fault. If he's set his mind on coming. He's coming."

Letting out a long breath Róisín turned towards Mae.

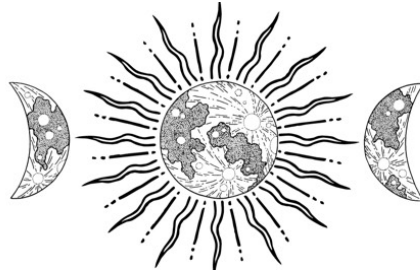
"Alright, if it means that much to you, then I guess we'll be looking out for two people now. I understand Mae, siblings are everything." Mae smiled, but Róisín looked torn from the inside out. Before she had a chance to ask the girl, the door opened fully.

"Thanks, Ró," Kiel begins, closing the door softly behind him. "Don't worry though, you won't be protecting me. I won't need it. You never know. I might just save your little shadowy behind." He winked, causing the three girls to burst out laughing.

"Alright, let's finish packing. We've got six hours until sunset. We will set out then. We've got three and a half days and a hell of a lot of ground to cover," he states. Taking charge and making the girls laugh even harder. Mae hands her crossbow off.

"Well, extra hands mean extra weapons. Here you go, learn to use it fast."

The Lady of Darkness



Drip, drip, drip.

Will that infernal dripping *ever* end? She sang under her breath to keep herself from diving into madness, songs of her home, of mermaids and pirates, lullabies she sang to Róisín when she was a tiny baby. Keeping the insanity at bay for a mad Goddess would fare worse than a malevolent one. A Goddess of malice was in control of her emotions, in control of her actions, in control of the punishment she inflicted upon the mortals who deserved it. A mad Goddess would deal out punishment wherever she pleased, having no care for the implications that would follow. She vowed to not descend into madness again, and so she thought of her daughter.

A soft summer breeze tickled her face. The wind grabbed at her hair and tossed the black strands around her shoulders. She made her way to the sequoia tree. The largest tree in the realm. Its branches stretched higher than she could see. Fingers reaching towards the mortal realm as if to guide the souls of the deceased to their new home. False, of course, since she could see The Keeper on the wrap-around porch of his homestead with a piece of parchment. His nimble hands scribbled words down as he checked over supplies. His cloak sat in a heap on a rocking chair, gray as deep twilight, edged in a deep blue it covered The Keeper from head to toe. A large hood covered most of his face. Although he did not have to do this, he told the Lady that he did not want new souls to fear him. The Keeper was all angles, sharp cheekbones with gray flaking skin. One dragon-like eye was always watching, the other blind, white as bone. A long gray beard

brushed along his chest. Matching long hair spilled down around his shoulders, pulled back from his face with a leather cord. He always told her that he knew souls were confused after death, and so he tried to keep them safe. The only thing older than the Lady herself was The Keeper. He had existed since before time itself.

Something crashed to the ground, and she turned to see The Keeper waving his gray fist at Darius who was chasing luminflies, created from the souls of butterflies, too excited to see he had knocked over most of The Keeper's jars. Darius was Róisín's only playmate here. A small cat with half of his ear chewed off. He was black, but the tip of his tail and one intact ear were gold. Mirroring Róisín's eyes. The Lady was unsure of where Darius came from, but the cat held a special place in their family.

'Bloody feline! Get back here!' But Darius was already halfway across the yard, hopping up and trying to snag a luminfly on his claws. The Keeper sighed and turned back on his heel, busying himself again with his preparations. In two days' time, he would make his way towards the Darkrael, to once again bring the new souls to the Afterworld, where they would be judged by herself and the Prince of the Sun. The job of the Gods was never ending.

She sat down on a large root protruding from the ground and anxiously waited. She finally saw him approach, running his hand through his wheat gold hair unraveling the braids it was usually tied in.

"My Lady." He bent down on one knee, kissing her hand before gazing up into her coal-black eyes.

"There is no need for the formalities, my love," she said, grabbing his hands and pulling him towards her. When his arms wrapped around her waist and lifted her into the air, she felt warmth all over.

This is love. This is safety. She thought to herself.

"Are you ready?" he asked her, rubbing a hand over her stomach. "Mother Moon," he whispered in her ear. Grazing his lips across her neck, sending shivers down her spine.

"As I will ever be," she replied. Reaching up to entangle her pale fingers in his hair. Tugging at the braids, she pulled him toward her. Their lips collided; she felt a buzzing through her body. This was forever.

A golden meteor shower could be viewed from the mortal realm that night. As the Lady gave birth.

Gazing down at the gift she and her love had received she felt at peace. Reaching for his hand, they lay their heads together, blankets woven of starlight wrapped around the tiny bundle in her arms. Cooing noises could be heard. She reached down and moved the blanket aside. Grasping each other as if they were one another's lifeline were two tiny baby girls. One with one obsidian eye and one of gold, the other with eyes the color of a sunrise on a winter's morning. Blue swirling with pink and orange. One child of shadows, the other as soft as a candle.

Her sweet baby girls. They would feel nothing but love. Raised just and fair, one day they would confidently lead the realm. When she had committed to a quiet life with her lover, she would watch her girls judge the deceased with the same compassion her Prince showed her. For now, everything was perfect. She lowered her three eyes to the tiny babies in her arms again, one bone pale with light running through her veins, one shone of gold. She tipped her head towards her Prince again as he softly kissed all three of her eyelids. Wrapping his arm around their family, he pressed a kiss to each of his daughters' foreheads.

"You are so loved," he whispered.

Her two daughters...

Her breath hitched in her chest, as the scene danced out of her reach, dissolving from her mind. Sobs escaped from her mouth, echoing all around her surrounding her in her sorrow. Oil slick tears ran down her face. She missed them. She could feel her heart shattering. She would do anything to find her daughters. She knew Róisín was being kept in the hellscape, not far, but just out of reach. She knew she would find a way to break these bonds, eventually. She would find Róisín, they would leave this place and they would find her, the missing Goddess. *Her perfect daughters, her shadow and fire*, she wanted to see them together again more than anything in the universe.

Disgusted with the mortal that had captured her, she became enraged. A Goddess is not to be toyed with. Steeling herself against the memories of her family, she tried again to break her bonds. Melting her skin to the black bones beneath. It was useless, though; she was never going to escape these shackles.

"I had them specially crafted for you, *My Lady*." She heard footsteps coming toward her.

"*Balo*," she sneered. She saw the King in her mind. His dark brown hair was cropped close to his head. She could picture his tall frame, standing proud as the monarch of Elecara. She was disgusted by this man. Revulsion tingled through her from the tips of her toes to the top of her head. Spitting the words from her mouth, she said, "I already told you, I cannot return Lucien to the world of the living. Death cannot be reversed. Hell Water complicates the issue further. He was killed by something of my realm. Your son is dead. Now part of my world and you are going to have to accept that."

"I will not! I have captured a Goddess. *I* have *you* bound down here. You are at *my* command." Balo stomped his foot like a child. The sharp clack made her flinch. Recovering, she spoke again, calm and quiet.

"Command? I am The First Goddess. Best you remember that I am at no one's beck and call mortal. Rest assured that when I escape these bindings, I will rip you to shreds. I will tear your muscle from your bones, laughing while you scream for your dear son. I will turn your blood to mist and your bones to liquid. I will feed your eyeballs to Darius. That cat's favorite meal is criminals. *You will suffer for this.*"

Balo leered at the Lady of Darkness. Even though she was blinded, she could feel the waves of hostility coming off of him, washing over her and feeding her power.

"You only succeed at giving me more power Balo. I feed off your anger. It keeps me breathing."

"Enough! Fucking Gods and their nonsense. Might I remind you again? Silvered iron. You're in my basement. Not the other way around, you bitch." He reared back and cracked the Goddess across the face. Her head snapping so quickly to the side that were she a mortal her neck would have snapped.

"You will listen to me. You will bring Lucien back to me. Or I will tear apart the Afterworld, your darling prince and your little daughter, too."

At the mention of her love and Róisín, she turned her head in Balo's direction. She noted that there was no mention of her other daughter. Did the mortals not remember there were two girls? Pushing the thought from her mind, deciding it was to her advantage, she sighed. She was still a Goddess, something to be feared, but she would play his game. At least for a little while.

"Alright Balo, you win. I will find a way to get Lucien back to you. I just need you to unbind and unblind me."

"I can assure you, I was born on a day, but that day was not yesterday. Would you think me that stupid, that I am a fool, Mother Moon?" Balo asked.

"You will remain bound, and you will remain blind. You will *think* of a way to return my son to me. Once it is foolproof. *Then and only then* will it be executed. Upon my reunion with my son, I will spare your daughter and your *lover*, but you, for the anguish you have caused me, will perish. Bound by Silvered Iron I will throw you into the Hell Waters."

The Lady bowed her head and whispered under her breath.

"The only part of this that will prove to be true is that you are a *fool*." She knew Hell Water would not harm her. Though she could be certain beneath the waves something might. She could hear something whistle towards her again and the last thing she heard before sinking into the darkness was the crack of a whip as it connected with her face.

At least her memories would keep her company in the dark.

Chapter Four



Mae was lost in her thoughts; she was nervous for what lay ahead of them. She wasn't sure how much she believed the stories Róisín was claiming, but deep down she knew that she was getting into something way bigger than herself. She had always lived quietly, since becoming an adult she had stopped thieving and focused more on what she could contribute to the Kingdom. Though she came up short. She felt as though she never amounted to much.

Someone crept up behind Mae and tapped her on the shoulder. Letting out a scream and balling her fists in preparation to fight, she spun around.

"Three eyes of the Lady! Lia! You scared the life out of me. What are you thinking?" She snatched her fists back before they made contact with Ophelia's face.

"I'm sorry Mae," Ophelia said, laughter lighting up her eyes for the first time since Mae saw her three nights ago. They glowed from within, the blue deepening to a sapphire as they sparkled.

"You're not. You're laughing! Lia, why would you want me to die *before* our epic journey? How am I supposed to be written about in the history books if I am *dead*?" Mae laughed, but it wasn't as hearty as she wanted it to be. Ophelia got serious then, whispering so softly that Mae almost didn't catch what she was saying.

"I never want you to die, Mae. You mean too much to me." Ophelia turned her eyes down to the floor, scraping a shoe along the wood.

"You mean so much to me, Lia. You're my best friend. My family... my..." Mae stared off, wishing she could tell Ophelia everything. How she longed to touch her soft skin and run her fingers through her hair. She imagined the feeling was like touching silk. She longed to breathe in her scent, citrus she imagined, laced with vanilla. She wanted to breathe her in, intoxicating herself. She wanted to ensnare her in her arms. Kiss her long and hard. Make love beside the fire until the sunrise filtered its gentle light through the window. She imagined how the sun would dance across Ophelia's body. Her tanned skin glistening, her lips swollen from kissing Mae all night. Eyes only for her. Whispering sweet words of love before the birds even woke. She stopped her thoughts, knowing that she could never open that part of her heart up to another again.

"No Maeva," Ophelia started, taking Mae's hand in her own. Mae sucked a breath in through her teeth. Ophelia's skin was as soft as silk and as supple as leather. She sat and waited for Ophelia to continue.

"You mean too much to me. You mean *everything* to me. I..." she faltered. "I... I love you." She turned her eyes away, shame burning on her cheeks. Turning them a brilliant scarlet. Bringing out her eyes, making her even more beautiful. Ophelia loved her? This was too good to be true. She felt her heart speed up and start to soar, but just as fast she stomped the feeling down, guarding herself. She had been mistreated by beautiful girls before. They would lure her in with a wink and a drink. Woo her with words as gorgeous as their bodies. Only to leave her used, feeling dirty. She knew Ophelia wouldn't ever do this to her, but she could not shake the Daemons clawing at her mind.

Her heart had shattered with the first woman she loved. She thought this one was forever. Not only did she have a body to make the Lady of Darkness herself jealous, but she had a quick wit and a sharp tongue. She challenged Mae, made her think. Made her feel smarter, stronger. They could take on the world as long as they were together. As everything good does, though, it soured quickly. Soon, instead of challenging her, Mae found herself fighting. Her breaking point came when her lover would spend more time at the tavern than at home with her. Most nights she would come home stumbling drunk and ready to argue. Mae's flight or fight instinct kicked in then, always fight, always defend her heart. They would sling the most hateful insults at each other. Threatening to leave, threatening to hurt. Eventually, those words turned to actions. Leaving

Mae on the floor, broken and bruised on more nights than she could count. Mae woke one morning, and she was gone. Her clothing was missing from the floor. Her bags packed, nowhere to be found. All she left Mae with was a shattered heart and the strawberry scent of her hair.

Never again would Mae give her soul to another. With every girl she bedded, another piece of her heart turned to ice. Until it was whole again, but sharp, frozen, sealed against anything resembling love.

"I..." she faltered, searching for the words that would let Ophelia know how much she meant to her, but sealing off the door to love. "I... you... Ophelia. You mean so much to me. The past ten years, you have been my family. You and Kiel. You are the only people I have in this world. I will fight tooth and nail for you." Mae hung her head ashamed that she could not say more. She knew she wanted to be more to Ophelia, wanted to be more for her, but her heart couldn't take another break.

"I, oh... yes, family. Of course, that's what I meant. Family. I love you like family." Ophelia looked shattered. She swung away from Mae as fast as she could, but Mae still caught the tears that were starting to form in her blue eyes.

"Lia," Mae grabbed her arm. "That's not what I mean. I... I am damaged goods. Seriously, you don't want to love a mess like me." Ophelia yanked her arm out of Mae's grasp. Her face darkened.

"You don't get to tell me what I want and don't want to do Mae! You, of all people." Finally, the flood-gates opened, and hot tears poured down her face. Running from the living quarters sobbing, leaving Mae standing in the middle of the room staring after her best friend.

Great, now you've gone and done it you, cretin. A small voice started nagging at the back of her mind. You could, you know, you could open yourself up for her. It's been ten years that you've known her. Why couldn't you? She's picked you up countless times. She's been your rock. Without even being asked! You know her inside and out, and she you. You could. For her. You could love her.

A strange heat shot through her chest. She grabbed at herself as she felt a white-hot fire rage through her. Maybe, just maybe, a part of her heart was thawing.

For her.

"Lia! Wait!" She ran after her friend, through the kitchen and out into the cold early winter air. Snow was starting to drift down to the ground.

She placed her hand on Lia's shoulder. Spinning her around.

"I'm sorry. I really am," she said, wiping the tears away from Ophelia's eyes. Snowflakes caught in her eyelashes. She was so beautiful, it shot Mae through the chest. "Please stop crying. It's killing me to see you this upset. Please."

Ophelia's chest heaved as she took a deep breath. The tears wouldn't stop.

"Lia..." Mae started, looking up at her friend cautiously. "I understand if you don't want me to join you now. Kiel will take care of you. I can already see he's taken a liking to Ró, even after their fight, so he'll make sure you get to the Afterworld safe. You'll never have to see me again." She stopped, biting her tongue so hard she tasted blood, the tang of it spreading across her mouth.

"Never see you again?" Ophelia burst out. "That's not why I'm crying Mae! I just told you I *love* you! I know what you've been through with every woman before me. I know what it was like with *her*," Ophelia spat. "I was there! I was the one who you came to at three in the morning when she left you! I was the one who watched helplessly as you sobbed on my floor. My heart broke *with* yours. I thought we could be different. I thought maybe you could open yourself for me. I should have known better, though. I am such a fool. It's me who should be saying you'll never have to see me again." Turning away from Mae again, tears started flowing freely from Ophelia's eyes, fresh sobs escaped from her chest. Mae felt every tear burrow into her soul. She couldn't bear to see Ophelia like this.

Stepping closer to Ophelia slowly, like she was approaching a wounded animal, Mae put her hand on Ophelia's back. She felt her best friend lean into her, shoulders shaking as she tried to catch her breath.

"Lia, come inside," Mae begged. "You're going to freeze out here. Please." Putting out her hand, Ophelia placed hers on top. Together, they walked back towards Mae's cottage. She stopped as they approached the wooden door, stained a deep cherry, just the way Mae liked it. She spun Ophelia around, so they were facing each other. Mae tipped her head up. "And really. Lia, I could try. To open my heart, I mean. I really do want to love every part of you. Give me time."

"I will give you time. I will give you the world," hope filled Ophelia's voice. A small smile finally found its way to her lips and Mae felt the world start to spin again.

"Why didn't you say anything sooner, Lia?" Mae asked.

"I wasn't going to potentially die sooner. That kind of information makes you think about what is important," Ophelia replied.

Yeah... you've got that right. I don't know if I can open my heart. I don't know if I am ready yet, but I want to try.

The girls walked back into the living room. The fire had died down, but the warmth remained. Seeping into Mae's bones and thawing her skin. She looked around the small room, the walls and floor made of wood and stone. She had built this place herself. She felt pride every time she stepped through the threshold; her hands had made the walls. Her blood and sweat were infused in every inch. This was her home.

Kiel slouched on the divan, looking confused by a throw pillow. He tossed it in the air, and it smacked Róisín in the back of the head.

"*Excuse me mortal!*" she shouted in mock shock. Orion puffing up behind him with a menacing look in his green eyes. Róisín turned toward the bird and scratched him under the neck

"Don't worry my sweet, sweet predator. I can take care of myself." Orion settled back under her arm as she laughed and grabbed the pillow. She tossed it high into the air, aiming it back at Kiel. It smacked him in the chest.

"Quite the arm you've got Ró!" he exclaimed as he clutched at his chest and pretended to die.

"What are you two doing?" Mae asked. "And you, you ungrateful beast. Remember who feeds you!" she scolded Orion.

"It's called a *throw* pillow, isn't it?" Kiel said, laughing and tossing the pillow back into the air.

"Sure, sure," Mae replied as Orion came to perch on her shoulder. Moving to the kitchen she got out a treat of cured meat for him.

"I know you'll take care of Róisín, Ri. I can count on you." She ran her hand over his glossy black feathers, brushing her fingers along the gold tips of his wings. He let out a small chirp and grabbed the meat with his talon, tossed it in the air, and flew back over to Róisín.

Moving back to the living room, she checked over their supplies one last time. She made note of the four packs filled to the brim with food and other supplies, such as bandages and a needle and thread. If there were injuries, they were going to have to make do with what they had. Kiel

walked up behind her, hands clasped behind his back, a sheen of sweat sticking his pale blonde waves to his forehead.

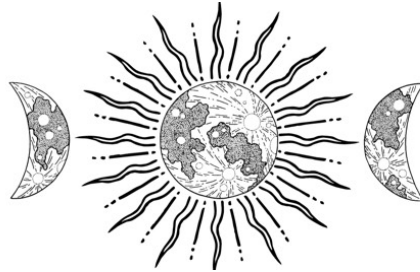
"So, how'd it go with the Princess? Are you two madly in love? Forgetting this whole adventure and riding off into the sunset?" He winked at her and laughed. She punched her friend in the shoulder and slung her sword back around her hips, checking to make sure that her daggers were again sitting at her thigh, hip and forearm. Mae tried to hide her smile.

"Hey, if I leave now, how would you and Róisín survive on your own? Her maybe, but you?" Mae let the sarcasm flow into her words. It made her feel comfortable.

"Wow, ye of little faith," Kiel said, feigning annoyance. "I am certain I can survive out there." She barked out a short laugh and handed Kiel a pack. Taking one last look around her small cottage, she said goodbye to the place she called home. She glanced at the mess in her bed-chamber that she could see through the doorway, making a mental note to clean up when she got back.

"Let's go," she said to the group. "It's sunset."

The Lady of Darkness



Drip, drip, drip.

She had lost all track of time. How long had she been here? Days? Weeks? There was no sunrise or sunset to give her any clues. The cloth bound around her eyes blocked everything. She may thrive in the dark, but void of her most important senses she found her mind slipping again. She wished for the day she would escape these shackles and tear Balo limb from limb. She fantasized about turning him inside out. She wanted to make his blood boil; she wanted to press her fingers to his temples and squeeze until his head popped like an overripe melon. She would make him pay for locking her in here. If he thought this was a way to gain her mercy, he was in for a surprise. She had existed longer than he had, already millennia old when he was but a crying baby at his mother's breast. She would exist long after his demise. A demented smile lifted her lips as she thought about how she would continue to make him suffer in the afterlife. This man would be the pinnacle of torture. This would be why criminals feared what awaited them in the Afterworld. She could feel the malevolent thoughts creep into her mind, how she would harness the power of the night and make Balo suffer.

Giving her head a shake, she reminded herself that she was a changed Goddess. One of forgiveness and love, justice and peace. She tried to remember that almost every mortal deserved some mercy. Her Prince had shown her what she could be. How she could be better. To keep the vicious thoughts at bay, she instead thought of him.

She spied him on the banks of the Darkrael. She hid behind a gnarled tree, gazing out over the deep blue water. She saw him reach down to embrace a young child who was no older than three. The child was shivering and wiping away tears.

Souls were often confused once they reached the bank of the river and waited for The Keeper. Children, even more so. They never quite understood why their lives had been cut short. They still felt as if they were alive. Most cried while desperately searching for their parents. Children were always the hardest to console, as they were so young, they clung to their lives harder than most. She did not know how to help these souls, so she let The Keeper do it for her.

The Afterworld was just that, the Afterworld. It was she who had created worlds of nightmares for anyone who sinned during their time in the mortal realm. She, however, did not know what to do with children. She was unaware of any place for pure souls, for every adult that made it before her to be judged could be found guilty of something. Fortunately, she never had to think very hard about this. It was not her dilemma. The Keeper took them somewhere. Where? She didn't know. She wasn't sure she cared.

She crept her way closer to the water's edge, the rocky shore sloping down to the river. She felt like every step she took sounded like cannons; she was sure someone would notice her sooner rather than later. She listened to the conversation between the handsome man and the young soul.

"Wh... wh... why am I here?" he wailed. Collapsing to the ground, pounding at the stones with his tiny fists.

"Hush child," he spoke with the warmth of the Sun in his voice. He held out a bronze hand to the child, who stared at it curiously. "You can be at peace here, I promise you."

"B... b... b... but where is my mommy? Where is my papa? Whe... where is sissy?" Sobs came harder and faster from the child. He snatched his hand back from the man and flung himself into the stones again.

"I'm so sorry child, you had to leave them. You must stay here now, but I promise you will be happy." The man bent down to embrace the child again. Rising on one knee, he met the child at eye level. He smiled at the young soul; warmth radiated from him. "There are puppies here. So many of them! And I know they've been waiting for a playmate like you."

"Really?" the child asked. Their woes were temporarily forgotten. "I love puppies!" The man smiled again at the child and took his hand. Together, they walked along the river. She watched as they picked their way over the stones, following along on the other side, hiding behind trees or rocks whenever the man turned his head toward her. After a short walk, they arrived at a beautiful meadow. Small blue and purple wildflowers poked up through the green grass. The entire place was blanketed in a golden light.

"This is The Keeper. He will take you now, and tomorrow we will play with the puppies for as long as you like," he told the child. Is this where The Keeper took these children? She didn't see any others, but perhaps they were playing. Where had this man come from? She was unaware of any other Gods. She was curious about the man who shone like the Sun. She had spent so long in the dark.

The child wrapped his tiny arms around the man's thigh and smiled up at him with tears in his eyes. He then turned to The Keeper who had his hand outstretched. The child hesitated, staring wide eyed at that flaking skin, but grabbed it with pudgy fingers and followed him, as well as the other souls he was escorting. The child excitedly asked The Keeper what kind of puppies they had for him to play with.

Watching them leave, the man straightened himself and turned towards the river, sighing and rubbing his neck. He was beautiful; she thought to herself. Polished bronze skin, smooth and unblemished. His hair the color of a sun-kissed wheat field. Tousled into long waves braided out of his face and fastened by leather cords. He was tall, reaching well over eight feet. A wonderful compliment to her six and a half, she found herself daydreaming. Shaking her head, she gazed toward him again. He turned his eyes out over the river, dark, but she could see from here the colors of a sunset shot through them. Trailing down his sculpted cheeks and jaw, her eyes roamed, finding their way down his arms covered in a fine white silk. His hands looked strong, yet she felt like they would be gentle. His fingers looked like they were dipped in the sun itself. She closed her eyes; she could see his hands roaming her body. Followed by his mouth trailing kisses that burned her skin with passion.

She felt him tip her head up and lower his lips to hers. A fire igniting in her belly. A hunger, a need.

'I need you.' She whispered to him. Silently, he swept her up in his arms and led her towards her chamber door. She craved, and she begged for him.

Shaking her head coming out of her fantasy, she looked out across the river again. All she could see was the retreating silhouette of the man who had been there only a moment ago.

She was determined; she had to see him again. She felt their fates intertwined like a web. This would be the man she would be with for eternity.

Footsteps stomped towards her.

"Have you figured out a plan to get Lucien back to me?" Balo asked, sounding more pleasant than usual. She could smell the alcohol on him.

"No Balo, I do not have a way to bring back someone who was drowned by Hell Water. There is a reason it's called *Hell Water*. It is tied to my realm. I do not know what else you want me to say."

"YOU WILL BRING HIM BACK TO ME," Balo bellowed. "He is my son, and you will return him to me. You had no right to take him from me." She felt droplets hitting her face where the cloth was not bound around her eyes. Spittle flew from Balo's mouth as he continued to accuse her. "He is mine! *Mother Moon* indeed. *Stealing* children from their parents! My heir! My baby boy. My Lucien. You have no right to him. No reason to keep him away! Bring him back! Bring him back! RETURN HIM TO ME!" Balo sounded as if he was losing his grip on reality. She could hear him stomp his feet on the stone floor. She imagined his arms flailing about like a toddler having a tantrum. "Return him! My baby, my precious Lucien! My boy, my boy."

She felt the white-hot heat of a whip across her arm. Snarling at Balo, she felt rage simmering just below the surface of her calm demeanor that her Prince had helped her perfect over the last millennia.

"You will *never* see your son again, Balo. And I vow to you that when you cross to the Afterworld, he will not be waiting for you either. You *will* burn for what you have done to me." She lunged for him, guessing where he was based on the smell of stale alcohol. She was stopped short by her chains.

"Oh, My Lady, you are in no place to be threatening me. Let me explain this to you again. You will return Lucien to me, or I will kill your entire family." He tsked. She could hear him start to pace the room. He

was murmuring something to himself. She couldn't make out the words. Finally he spoke loud enough for her to hear.

"Right now, your darling little Róisín is chained up. She cries for you, you know. Every night '*Mama, mama! Help me.*' She begs. The longer you take the more she suffers. Every day you fail to find a way to return my son. I will break her down. I will chop every one of her fingers off. I will rip out her eyes and grind them into paste. I *will* kill her."

"Fuck you, Balo!" the Lady sneered back at him. Rage clawing at her chest like a caged animal begging to be let out. The air in the room tasted of her rage, bitter. She snapped her teeth. If he was going to keep her chained like a wild creature, then a wild creature is what she would be.

Bong, bong, bong. A deep bell tolled throughout the entire house. Her anger temporarily forgotten as she heard footsteps scrambling down to her cell.

"Your majesty!" A guard, she assumed, huffed, trying to catch his breath.

"What is it, you insolent fool? Can't you see I'm busy?"

"It's... the girl," he breathed out.

"The girl? You incompetent son-of-a-whore! How can you not contain one *little girl*?" She heard the guard trying to choke out words, assuming Balo had him by the neck, and was lifting him toward the ceiling. She could hear his boots scraping the wall trying to find purchase.

"Your... daughter." He managed before she heard his body hit the floor. She could not hear him breathing anymore. She could feel his soul as it left him. He had passed on to her realm now.

"Fucking bitch! Why does everyone feel the need to undermine me every day? I will kill that little harlot," Balo seethed. Marching out of the cell and slamming the door, she heard iron clanging, the lock sliding home.

"Find them! Bring them back to me! My *daughter's* head will roll!" His voice grew fainter as he made his way through the corridor.

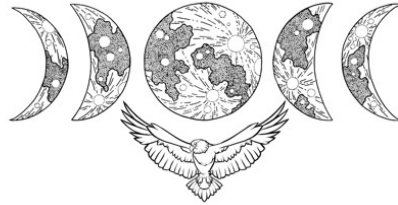
The Lady said a silent prayer, to whom she couldn't say, but she prayed someone would watch over her daughter. She prayed that someone would watch over Balo's daughter for if she had rescued Róisín from her evil father she was going to need protecting.

She sat back against the damp brick with nothing to do for the moment but wait. Wait and let her rage grow. For one day soon, it would be Balo's

demise. She closed her eyes.

Drip, bong, drip, bong, drip, bong.

Chapter Five



Mae heard the deep toll of the alarm bell.

Shit! The bells only rang when the palace was in danger. It didn't ring often, usually only to inform the townsfolk to brace themselves for a siege. It'd never happened in Mae's lifetime. Mae heard no other sounds in the village just the bell as it reverberated through her, causing her teeth to clatter together.

Balo had figured out the girls were missing. Every single soldier in his battalion would be crawling all over the Kingdom soon. They had little time to waste.

Well, we're fucked. Mae thought to herself. Deciding to keep her pessimism to herself, for now, she turned to her friends.

"Alright, big bad Balo has figured out you two are gone." She stabbed her finger towards Ophelia and Róisín. "We've made it twenty feet," she said, sweeping her hand back to show them the door to her cottage. "If we want to outrun them, we better get a move on. Follow me."

They kept to the shadows. Crawling along the back alleys. The stench of rubbish gagged Mae; she pulled her shirt up over her nose, hoping to keep out some of the smell. She tripped over the outstretched leg of a man passed out on the ground. The smell of vomit and whiskey was so strong she could smell it from her standing position. Her eyes started to water. The underbelly of Elecara threatening to overwhelm her senses and cause her to pass out.

“Hey Ró,” she heard Kiel say, not bothering to keep his voice low. “Can't you, you know, help us out here? Aren't you made of shadows? Shouldn't you be able to manipulate them and hide us all or something? It would make this whole ordeal a lot easier.” He slumped against a brick building. The alley was shrouded in shadows, the buildings around them falling to disrepair.

“I can,” Róisín shot back. “But I haven't finished my studies yet. I can conceal myself and Orion. I could probably make one more of you go mostly unnoticed, but it won't be foolproof.” Róisín pouted and ruffled Orion's feathers. He pecked gently at her cheek. She smiled at the bird.

Those two are getting along famously. Mae thought. At least she wouldn't have to always have her eyes on Ró. She trusted Orion with her life. Surely, she could trust him with the tiny Goddess. She motioned for the group to follow her. She showed them how to step lightly on the cobblestones to keep themselves quiet.

“Gods, Halton.” Mae turned toward a deep voice, holding up her hand to stop everyone. “Can you believe we're out here kicking shit looking for some child? Who cares? Who cares about the *princess*? Why that asshole all of a sudden cares where his daughter went with some child is beyond me.” The sound of stones kicked by large boots echoed off the alley walls. To Mae it sounded like they were surrounded. Ducking behind a pile of rubbish, she felt the group collectively hold their breath against the stench.

“A lot of things are beyond you, Percy. Let's just find them.”

“Haha. Oh, by the Prince, Halton, you're fucking hilarious. A real fucking comedian.” The two soldiers made their way closer to where Mae and the others were hiding. Mouthing to Kiel to make sure the girls stayed safe and hidden, she crept out of the shadow.

Silently, she moved forward. Living the life of a thief did have advantages. Her instincts kicked in, her feet finding placement on their own. Survival was the only thing on her mind. She slithered up behind the guard, the one named Percy. She grabbed his neck and drew her dagger across his throat. Blood bubbled up under her fingers hot and slick, it made her grab falter. However, her first kill was done. The guard let out a gurgle as she dropped him to the ground. His body was a heap at her feet, her boots getting blood on them.

“What the fuck!” Halton shouted. “Who the fuck are you?” he screamed. Making far too much noise.

“Would you shut up!” Mae hissed and leaped toward him. Plunging her dagger into his abdomen.

“May the Lady find it in her to show you mercy in the Afterworld,” she said, letting his body slide off her dagger and fall to the street. Blood pooled around her feet. “Though I doubt you deserve it.” She wiped her hands on her pants and made her way back toward Kiel and the others.

“Mae!” Ophelia cried. Rushing out from the shadows. “What did you do?”

“What I had to do, to keep you safe,” she replied. She had never killed before, never had reason to. She slid her shaking hands into her pockets. Immediately removing them and running them through her hair.

What had she done? She wasn't even thinking about the consequences, just that she needed to keep Ophelia and Róisín away from the King. She slumped down against the wall. The brick caught her shirt on the way down. She put her head in her hands and took deep breaths, trying to calm herself. She just wanted to keep everyone safe. Worse, she hadn't wanted to kill those men, but deep down, she found a sick thrill in it.

Disgusting, you are disgusting. She thought to herself. Mae felt a soft touch on her arm and looked up to see Róisín standing beside her.

“Time has taught me one thing. We all have daemons, but we do what we think is right by those we love. Put your thoughts aside, Mae, you have saved us. You are a good person.” Mae scoffed. She didn't believe a word coming from this child's mouth.

“What do you know of good and evil?”

“I *am* good and evil, Mae. My mother is death, my father the Sun, the giver of life. My mother takes it away.

Before they met, I learned that my mother was not a merciful Goddess. The smallest crime would send you to the depths of the Afterworld. Your worst nightmare comes to life, torturing you from waking to sleeping. A never-ending circle. My father taught her mercy. Taking pure souls to the Heavens to spend all eternity in the sweetest peace. He showed her that mortals can be forgiven. And he reminds her again and again that not every crime warranted the same punishment. There are levels and balance.” Róisín sat down beside Mae, running her small pale hands between the cobblestones, pulling out weeds.

“I am born of dark and light, of death and life, of good and evil. I am not perfect by any means Mae, but I am balanced. You are good, you may

be descended from evil, but I can assure you, you will be forgiven.”

“How do you even know that Róisín? I just killed people! Killed, not hurt... they are not coming back.” Mae dropped her forehead to her knee. She tried to curl into herself.

“I just know,” Róisín said, looking into the distance, her face drawn, showing her age. Mae looked to Róisín, again. Swallowing the lump that formed in her throat, she embraced the child Goddess.

“Thank you Ró,” she whispered.



They were running out of cover that night afforded them. There was still so much ground to cover to even reach the border of the Kingdom. They had only just reached the edge of the village. There were still the farmlands to go through. The six wealthiest of Elecara's families were either investors or farmers. Each one contributing to the survival of the kingdom. Mae's parents were investors, purchasing buildings that people could no longer afford, turning them into businesses and adding to their already vast fortune. The family to the west of them were farmers, providing the kingdom with crops. Judging by the map Mae was following in her head, this is where they would have to cross to leave the kingdom. She just hoped there wouldn't be much more trouble.

Already Mae was exhausted. She felt an ache in her bones, wanting so much to just sit by the fire with a drink, and maybe a book. There was just so much walking to this *adventure*. Pressing forward, she led the group ever slowly toward their destination. She remained on high alert after the first two soldiers. She made sure the group stayed back while she rounded corners with a dagger in each hand. A few cats startled her, but otherwise they were left to the quiet of the night. While they walked, she admired her daggers.



Gifted to her by Fletcher, the man she grew to love as a father. Despite their slow to trust beginning, when he caught her on the street trying to pick his pocket, she remembered him fondly. Always sitting by the hearth

with a pipe in his mouth, his gray beard trimmed neatly, although it was longer in the middle and pointed. He would always be reading, his sharp dragon-like eye moving rapidly across the page. He was blinded in the other eye, the pale color reminding Mae of milk. Although he was already reaching seventy, he had the spirit of a much younger man.

“Running gangs about.” Is what he claimed kept him young. One night he was reading to her about some fantastical swordsman that slayed a dragon to save a princess. She was only ten at the time, but she dreamed one day of saving her own princess and living happily ever after. Maybe her parents would even give her their blessing. Maybe her parents would care. In the end, she decided it didn't matter if they did. The only person who she needed was Fletcher. She snuggled up under the fur blanket and looked around. Fletcher's modest cottage would one day be the inspiration for Mae's own home.

Fletcher reached behind his oversized chair and handed her a beautiful wooden box. Deep grooves lined the lid, the wood stained a deep ochre. Opening the lid, Mae found herself face to face with two beautiful daggers. One of obsidian steel, so shiny she could see her reflection in it. It glittered in the fire-light almost as if lit from inside, two eagle heads carved into its hilt. A stone as precious as the moon sat between the bird heads. The other dagger was an opal color swirling with pastel pinks and blues. The loveliest angel sat upon its hilt, her wings stretching to curl around the wielder's hand.

“Those are for you, child. You'll have your own dragons to slay one day. May these aid you.” He didn't appear to have issue with giving a ten-year-old things to stab people with.

“Fletcher, why me?” Young Mae inquired, tugging at the braids she had wrestled her hair into that morning.

“You know why child, I have no family of my own. My wife perished before you were but a thought in your parents' minds. You are the closest thing I will ever have to a daughter. I can think of no one better to receive such a gift.”

“Thank you,” she said, looking down to the daggers again. Her beautiful weapons. With these in her hands she would never have to be afraid again.

Fletcher had now since passed himself. Never to see her grow, never to see her find her own princess. He would never be there when she wed,

bouncing her children upon his knee while she baked cookies in the kitchen, her lovely wife out in the garden, singing and tending to the roses. It hurt her. No, people like Mae didn't deserve a happy ending, at least not one like that.

She came upon him one day slumped in his chair; the fire had burned to embers overnight. The smell of decay drifting through the room. The pipe was still smoking in his mouth, never to be inhaled again. He looked as though he was sleeping, but when she shook him, he never woke up. She cried that day as if she had lost her own parents. Wretched sobs ripped through her. She sat hunched by his chair for hours, her shadow growing longer as the moon chased the sun across the sky. She loved Fletcher in a way she couldn't love her own parents. He was her family.

She heard movement on the roof then.

Bloody vermin can't even wait for him to turn cold before robbing him. Then a scrabbling and squawking reached her ears. Forgetting her tears, she ran outside to see a small black eagle. He bore a striking resemblance to the one on her gifted blade. She climbed the trellis on the side of Fletcher's house. Finding her footing on the clay tile roof, she made her way slowly to the eagle who had his talon stuck in a vine.

She approached him slowly; she reached out. He snapped at her fingers, nearly taking her ring finger right off.

"Hey, you ungrateful beast, I'm trying to help you." The bird screeched in agony again, but settled down to allow Mae to get close enough to untangle him. Using the black steel dagger, she made quick work of the vines that had trapped the bird.

"There you go, off, shoo. Go find a mouse to eat." She clapped her hands at him. Instead of flying away, he went up and slid his head under her hand and gently pecked at her ribs.

"Uh no way, you're not eating me!" He flashed his eyes at her. Green, just like hers. He held out a gold tipped black wing as if to shake hands.

"Oh... uh okay. Hi, I'm Mae."

He let out a loud cry in response, but Mae heard a name, clear in her mind: *Orion*.



“*Mae!*” Kiel whispered harshly. She stopped short, her feet scrambling on the cobblestones. She grabbed onto the rough wood of the nearest house, tripping forward and almost getting trampled by a horse.

“You're gonna get trampled by a horse,” he said flatly.

“Thanks,” she replied taut. Mae stared at the sky. The stars were starting to wink out, clouds were rolling in. She could taste the dampness in the air. A heavy snowstorm would hit Elecara soon. She hoped to be out of the village by then. She put her fingers between her lips and let out a trill. Orion swooped down from the rooftops, clutching to the leather she wore at her shoulder he nuzzled his beak into her hair. She shivered, wrapping her cloak around her tighter, fending off the chill as a light snow began to fall. She handed him a piece of meat and asked him how many more soldiers stood between them and the edge of the kingdom. He let out three low chirps, grabbing the piece of dry meat and throwing it into the air before swallowing it.

“Has no one ever told you not to play with your food? Where is your mother?” Róisín asked, laughing, her golden eye sparkling in the dark.

“Very funny, Ró. Everyone's a comedian tonight, aren't they?” Turning to face her two friends and the tiny child she told them, “There are three soldiers between us and the border of the Kingdom. We'll go as quietly as we can. Orion will scout ahead. You all stay behind me. If things get bloody, find cover, stay out of sight and meet me behind Trader's Porch. Let's go.” Stalking ahead of her friends, she stopped short when she heard voices behind her. “Seriously, we do not have a lot of night left. I don't know about you guys, but I really do not feel like getting caught.”

“Mae. I'm not letting you out of my sight,” Ophelia said, grabbing her hand. Her skin was warm against Mae's frozen hand. Looking down at their clasped hands, Kiel put his hand over top of them.

“Me either, all three of you. We're in this together. Okay?” He smiled at Mae, his charm oozing out of his smile. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Mae glanced down at their hands. A small moon pale hand had joined theirs.

“All of us,” Róisín said quietly. Mae could see she was outnumbered, her heart swelled that these people wanted to protect her as much as she wanted to protect them.

“Alright, okay. Fine. Here.” She handed her dagger with the angel carved on its hilt to Ophelia. “I hope you learn fast. Keep your wits about

you. And again, if we get split up, Trader's Porch." Embracing Mae, Ophelia squared her shoulders, clutching the dagger turning her knuckles white.

"Kiel. Take my sword. Watch Róisín. I've got the bow."

"Or... I can take the bow." Kiel made a face. "I don't even know how to hold this thing."

"You'll learn," she said, winking, knowing Kiel would be fine. His father made sure he had some kind of training in archery and weaponry. She faced the sky, looking at the twinkling stars. Mae then turned to her friends, hoping that this wouldn't be the last time she saw them.

Orion let out a whistle.

"Here we go." Slowly, they crept through the shadows. The three soldiers came around the corner, their hulking shadows blocking Mae's view of the path ahead.

Of course, they're all together. Couldn't catch a break, could we? Mae thought.

"Hey! Stop! By order of the King!" one of them shouted, noticing the group as soon as they stepped into the light. They drew their swords, The *shlink* of metal sliding from scabbards signified that someone wasn't making it out of this alive.

Before Mae could make a move, Ophelia let out a battle cry, It was a desperate, strangled sound as she lunged at the soldier in front of her. Blood sprayed her face, leaving streaks of gore across her golden cheeks. In a fit of rage, that could only be brought on by a lifetime of being hated by your own father, Ophelia jumped on top of the soldier's chest. Stabbing over and over and screaming, tears made trails through the blood already glistening on her face. This woman was fierce. Mae could feel her heart thawing more and more. What a weird thing to love about this girl. She wanted to run to her and kiss her. She would have to address that later. She shook her head and turned to the task at hand. Again, she reminded herself this isn't the time to be thinking about kissing Ophelia. She grabbed her two leftover daggers and ran toward one of the other soldiers. Briefly, she saw Kiel out of the corner of her eye, steel on steel, with the third soldier. Their weapons clashing and ringing out in the quiet night. Kiel seemed to be having trouble actually swinging the sword, finally deciding to lift it above his head and try to hack the man in front of him.

The soldier in front of her, let out a cry snatching her attention from her friends as he slashed toward her, leaving a deep gash in her forearm. The wound sent blood flying everywhere. A primal scream ripped through her throat, leaving it raw. She felt fire in her chest and a rage she could no longer control. Where had this urge to kill come from? Was this her Daemon father finally paying a visit?

There will be time to figure that out later. First, we have to make it out alive. She thought to herself. Letting out another cry of anger, she lifted her arm back and threw her dagger. It struck home in the soldier's eye. He clawed at his face, falling to the ground.

As she walked up to him, he seemed to have found his footing. Raising his sword, he pointed it at her chest, her dagger comically bouncing up and down in the soldier's eye socket. The soldier brought his sword down again, Mae rolling out of the way, the edge catching some of her hair.

“Do you know what happens when you cut curls short you bastard!” Reaching behind her for her crossbow, Mae slid an arrow into the chamber and cocked it back. Leveling it with the soldier's knee, balancing it on her now bad arm, she let the arrow fly. It found its mark burying itself under the man's knee-cap. With a scream that would wake the dead, the man fell to the ground, pathetically trying to remove the arrow from his knee. Clawing at it with unsure fingers.

“You fucking bitch!” he seethed.

“Oh, a man full of compliments, are you?” she taunted. Mae came up behind him and grabbed his hair, yanking his head back. She dragged her final dagger across his chest, the flesh parting as she stabbed between his rib cage and up into his heart, burying her arm halfway to her elbow in the soldier's chest cavity.

“I have your heart. May the Lady take your soul,” She spat, dropping him to the ground as the strength in her right arm left her. “And lucky for me. That wasn't *my* sword arm, you asshole.” She kicked his lifeless body as Orion swooped down and landed on her shoulder; she let out another cry. Now that the fighting seemed to be over, she was exhausted and she was aching, a burning pain was spreading down her injured arm.

Kiel and Róisín seemed to have teamed up. The sight of the third soldier turned her stomach. His eyes swollen out of their sockets. His face frozen forever in a scream. His fingers had been separated from his hand, each one pointing a different way into the darkness. She stumbled over

something on the ground. Feeling her body sway, the fight had clearly gone out of her. She wondered what had come over her. She just carved a man's heart out. Again, a small part of her enjoyed what had happened. Before she could consider her predicament further, a few paces, away she heard sobbing.

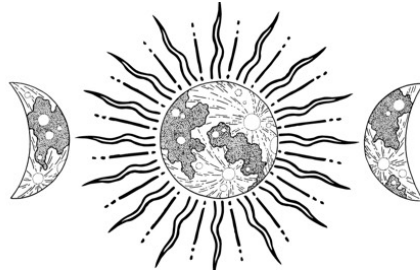
Mae went over to Ophelia who was on the ground. Picking her up and leading her away from the man who was now quite impressively dead, his chest looking almost caved in from where he had been stabbed so many times. Blood oozed behind his head, his mouth forever contorted into a grimace, as if he will forever relive his death in the Afterworld. His mouth hung open as if to beg for his life, a request that would never be heard. Leading Ophelia by the arm and away from the scene, Mae sat her down on the other side of a nearby building. She fell to her knees and rubbed Ophelia's back in small, hopefully soothing circles, using her good arm.

"It'll be okay Lia," she whispered leaning into her.

"How?" Ophelia sobbed

"Because it has to be."

The Lady of Darkness



Drip, drip, drip.

“Balo?”

Drip, drip, drip.

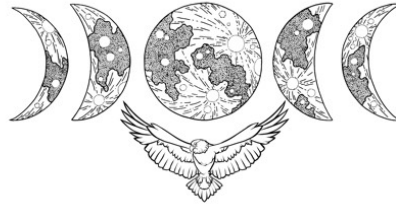
“Balo!”

Drip, drip, drip.

“BALO!”

Nothing but silence answered her screams.

Chapter Six



They sat in the shadow of the Trader's Porch. A hulking building on the outskirts of the kingdom. Mae cleaned the blood from her daggers gently, spending time with each one. Ophelia dropped the one she was lent in front of her like it was on fire and kicked it away from her. Kiel gingerly picked it up off the ground, placing a hand on Ophelia's shoulder. He kissed the top of her head.

"She is really not okay," he said, coming over to Mae. He set the dagger down. She glanced over as Ophelia tried to clean the blood off her face. She cried out in frustration and swiped at her face. Mae tore a strip off her shirt and took out her water skin. She walked over and sat down.

"Here. Let me help you." Gently, she grabbed Ophelia's hand and firmly set it in her lap. Mae made quick work of wiping away the gore that was crusting on Ophelia's golden skin.

"Mae... it's really alright I can get it." Ophelia turned her eyes down and kicked absent-mindedly at the dirt.

"It's not a problem. You're clearly struggling with this," Mae huffed, her breath coming out in cold puffs. She stayed quiet as she wiped the strip of cloth over one cheek. Finally breaking the silence, she asked the question that was burning in her mind.

"Lia, what happened back there? I've never seen that kind of emotion from you; in fact, for the entire time I have known you I'm not sure I've ever seen you angry. You've always been the picture of calm."

"I..." Ophelia faltered, "I don't really know what came over me. I suppose everything just crashed down at that moment, Lucien's death, my mother's death, my father keeping me away from everyone, treating me like a disease instead of his daughter." Ophelia stopped and swiped angrily at her eyes. "Telling you I love you, knowing you wouldn't love me back," she finished in a whisper. Fresh tears trailed golden lines through the blood that remained on her face.

"Lia, look at me, please," Mae begged. Ophelia looked up at her through her pale eyelashes. "I never said I wouldn't love you. In fact, I never said I didn't. I said I need time; hell I don't even think I need time. I just need to stop getting in my own way, but I've been hurt before."

"Yes, I'm well aware. I was always picking up the pieces after you let women use you up," Ophelia said seriously. "I never want to pick up another broken piece of heart."

"Lia... I..." It was Mae's turn to falter. Before she could say another word, Ophelia leaned in, her breath whispered a kiss across Mae's lips. So light that Mae was sure she imagined it. Her stomach swooped. Butterflies had made a home inside of her, bouncing around from place to place. Mae's head swam as she pulled back; Ophelia smiled softly. Mae reached up and touched her lips, warm and buzzing from where they had been touched.

"I'm sorry," Ophelia said, standing up. "I just... I can't lose you Mae. I..." She turned away; embarrassment colored her cheeks. Mae watched as she walked back to Róisín who was sitting with Orion feeding him chunks of dried meat. The bird gleefully tossed them in the air before catching them in his talon and stuffing the piece of meat into his beak.

"Lia! Wait!" Mae called after her friend. "I... I do love you," she finished to herself, watching as Ophelia sat down with Róisín and Kiel.



Watching her two friends, her family, whisper to each other made Mae's jealousy flare. Were they talking about her?

You're getting jealous now? Seriously? They're your friends. She sighed to herself as she walked over to her cloak and pack that was sitting on the ground. A crunch sounded on the stones behind her, Róisín and Orion coming to a stop just above her shoulder.

“You should wrap that.” Róisín pointed to the gash in Mae's right forearm. Blood was still oozing slowly out of the wound. Muscle and sinew parted, and Mae thought she could see the white of bone poking through the red.

“I've had worse,” she replied casually as she tried to hide the waves nausea.

“We really can't have you getting an infection and dying on us. You may be a cambion, but you still won't heal that fast enough.”

“Just watch.” Mae held out her wound to Orion. He looked at it, then pushed his head under his wing.

“You have the power to put birds of prey to sleep?” Róisín asked, raising an eyebrow. “That does not seem like it's going to help you, or any of us, really. Unless Garlaow is back in the Afterworld, but really he perished centuries ago.” Just then Orion pulled his head out from under his wing, producing two large night black feathers, the gold at their tips glittering in the light from a streetlamp.

Taking the feathers from Orion and a length of leather, she lashed the feathers around the gash on her forearm.

“You've really lost a lot of blood haven't you Mae? What are *feathers* going to do?” Róisín asked.

“Will you shut up for a second?” Mae said as she pulled the cord tight. She winced as the knot pinched her skin. The feathers began to glow. White hot heat seared through Mae's arm. She looked up at Róisín who was blinking her onyx and gold eyes, probably trying to clear her vision. After a few moments, Mae untied the cord and wiped away the remains of Orion's feathers. The ash blew away in the light breeze that blew through the trees. Mae's skin was smooth white marble, as if she had never been hurt in the first place.

“Don't need to heal like a God, when I've got this guy looking out for me,” she said, laughing at Róisín's wide eyes and open mouth.

“Pick your jaw up. You're gonna get bugs in there.” Mae laughed again.

“What is he?” Róisín asked, reaching out to give Orion an affectionate pat.

“I really don't know. I met him on a roof a long time ago. What I do know is I used to get hurt a lot. I was always getting into things when I first met Orion. One time, I fell out of a tree! That was the first time he healed me, and the first time it dawned on me that he was no regular size-

shifting eagle, but maybe one day you and I can find out,” Mae replied. As she stood up and offered her hand to the child Goddess, she said, “We better find somewhere to catch a few hours of sleep. Varanstalle isn't far from here, but that doesn't mean I want to go in there tired. Come on.” They walked back to Kiel and Ophelia. Mae caught the tail end of their conversation.

“You're not stupid Lia, she'll get... oh *hey* you two,” Kiel said. He struck a match as he lit a cigarette, blue smoke curled into the cold air above his head.

“What are you two whispering about over here?” Mae asked.

“Wouldn't you like to know?” Kiel stuck his tongue out. “You ladies setting up camp out here? I have to pee,” he said as he walked behind the rundown building they were sitting under.

“Ever the gentleman. Also, did you just stick your tongue out? How old are you? Five?” Mae mocked him. Reaching into her pocket and bringing out a set of slender iron picks. “And we don't have to camp when you have a key to every building in the Kingdom!” She called after him. His musical laughter reached her ears in the darkness.

“Mae...” Ophelia looked at her. “Even if this place isn't running anymore won't the owner be here in a few hours? Wouldn't they come to just check on the place? We can't just break in and sleep here.”

“I can assure you, Lia, no one is coming to this building today.” Mae looked up at the sky. Hints of pink and orange had started to streak across the horizon. “Come on, we need a few hours of rest.”

“How do you know no one is coming?” Ophelia asked, stumbling after her. Doubt laced her words.

“I just know Lia. Are you coming?”

“Are we breaking into this shack?” Kiel quipped, as he joined the girls again.

“Breaking in is one way to say it. I call it borrowing without a key,” Mae said. She saw Ophelia relent, crossing her arms over her chest. The appeal of a few hours of sleep had won out over questioning Mae about who owned this building.

Around the back of the building, Mae jiggled the handle of the door.

Locked tight. She thought. Of course, her parents wouldn't be stupid enough to leave the door unlocked, even on an abandoned endeavor.

No one really knew who owned The Trader's Porch. Most people thought it was the buxom blonde who spent most of her time behind the bar. The woman who refilled drinks while leaning over so the men could get a good ogle at her chest. She was boisterous, and she never knew when to keep quiet. Mae hated her. Mae's parents were silent investors, choosing to fund the business without making an appearance.

She slipped one of her picks into the lock and moved it around. Within half a minute, she heard a satisfying click of the lock as it gave way. The door swung inward, where she was greeted by dust. Dust and darkness. Inside The Trader's Porch, the group wound their way around piled up chairs and tables. A layer of dust settled over everything, giving it a ghostly hue. Róisín sneezed as she made her way through the old building.

In its heyday, 'The Porch', as it was called by the locals was an opulent tavern and inn. Wealthy men and women in their finery would flock there every night to partake in the festivities. Tossing back One-Hundred-dollar whiskey, and dining on lamb leg, turkey, and venison among other specialties hunted by the kitchen staff. The only place in the Kingdom with finer fare was the palace, and not that many people were invited to dine with the King. By the hearth there would be live music to entertain the revelers, the tavern itself never really closing.

Upstairs, the inn housed ten rooms. Weary travelers would pay handsomely to spend the night at The Porch. Each room contained a large bed filled with the softest downy feathers. Fur blankets provided warmth in the winter, and silken sheets were provided in the summer, keeping guests cool. A small bathing area accompanied every room. Soaps smelling of lavender and lemon were provided to wash away the sweat of the day, or enjoy a dip with your lover, or your paid escort, for the evening. The Porch was well known for its "Don't ask don't tell" policy. Men and women who were looking for a night of fun with someone other than their spouse trusted The Porch to keep their secrets.

Now, however, The Porch had fallen into disrepair. Broken chairs piled in one corner, never to cushion the bottoms of the wealthy. The stairs were missing in spots, gaping black squares stared out from where they used to be. As Kiel wandered up the stairs, he skipped over the open holes with ease. His long legs provided the reach he needed. Kiel let out a cry of triumph.

“At least there are still beds up here!” he shouted down the stairs. Mae heard him as he stumbled back down the stairs while she inspected the bar.

“Thank the fucking Three Eyes of the Lady!” She hopped over the bar top, missing the edge and falling on her behind. She held up a bottle filled with an amber ale.

“Whiskey!” She quickly righted herself and popped open the bottle. She took a large swig and wiped her mouth, the liquid burning as it sloshed down her throat making her fingers tingle. She handed it to Kiel as he made his way back down, watching as he tripped on the missing bottom stair.

“Do either of you really need to drink? You’re already falling,” Ophelia said, as she sat down on the floor. Her skirt pooling around her, sending dust flying into the air. Ignoring her, Kiel grabbed the bottle and let out a low whistle.

“By the By. Finest whiskey coin can find.” He took a drink. Mae watched as he grimaced as the amber liquid went down his throat. He smiled, a drop falling off his chin and landing on the wooden floor. It made a perfect circle in the dust when it landed.

“It's your turn,” he said, as he thrust the bottle towards Ophelia.

“No thank you,” she stated, and firmly pushed the bottle back toward him.

“Oh, come on Princess,” he said laughing, but he took the bottle back from her without much of a fight and took another drink before he handed it back to Mae. She knew Ophelia would not touch the ale after watching her father spiral when Lucien died. She was glad that Kiel backed off rather easily, although she suspected that was so he could enjoy himself a little more. She held the bottle by the neck and tipped it back to her lips. She looked around the dingy room again, squinting her eyes through the dim light.

“Where is Ró? Ró!” She called, “Orion!” Panicked, the three of them fanned out and searched The Porch. Mae made her way up the stairs and saw one of the doors ajar. She pushed it open, its hinges squeaked in protest, assaulting her ears. She silently stepped inside the room. In the light from a streetlamp that came through the window, she could see Róisín and Orion on the bed. Orion had shrunk down to his ten-inch height and was curled against the girl's chest. Their breathing was in sync, Róisín's mouth hung open.

“They look so peaceful,” Ophelia whispered, coming up behind her. “We should let them rest.”

“You should get some rest too, Lia.” Mae looked to her friend. Her white hair looked dusty; the ends caked in blood. They hadn't even been on the move for a full day yet, but Ophelia looked as though she had traveled hard for a month. “Maybe a bath first?” she said. She made a point to look Ophelia up and down.

“Maybe you can show me how to use the bath?” Ophelia asked, a coy smile played across her lips.

“Lia,” Mae warned. “Please.”

“Mae, how are you ever going to give me a chance, give us a chance, if you're always so serious?”

“I'll show you serious,” Mae replied, as she took another long pull of whiskey. She grabbed Ophelia's hand and marched her to the room at the end of the hallway.

“Have fun ladies!” Kiel called as he came up the top of the stairs. Ophelia blushed a bright crimson, which pushed Mae over the edge. She showed Ophelia into the room and shut the door. The last thing she caught was Kiel's wink before it latched.



Using the elaborate pulley system to bring water up from the river, she drew a bath for Ophelia. After she lit the fire to warm the water, she rummaged through the cupboards and pulled out left behind soaps as well as a fur-lined robe. She made her way over to the bed where Ophelia was sitting.

She looked achingly beautiful as she sat in the dim fire-light. Her white hair, although blood crusted, shone, sparkled, as it curled around her shoulders. Her golden skin seemed to glow from within. Her full pink lips parted slightly as she watched Mae stumble around the room. Her blue eyes glittered with amusement as Mae came toward the bed. Giggling, Ophelia curled away from her, further up on the bed, beckoning her with her eyes.

With liquid courage urging her on, she grabbed Ophelia by the wrist and drew her up off the bed. She wrapped her arms around Ophelia's waist. She tugged at the lace that held her corset together. Clumsily, she pulled

them loose and let the corset fall to the floor. She reached up and slid Ophelia's light blue silk dress off her shoulders. She let it pool around her feet. Ophelia reached out to wrap her arms around Mae, but Mae held out a hand to stop her.

“No, no, Princess. You said I am too serious. I'm going to show you how serious I am.” Ophelia giggled again and stepped back, a playful look on her face. She was so confident in the nude.

Mae allowed her eyes to roam over the gentle curve of Ophelia's collarbone, to her breasts, her taut stomach leading down to sun kissed thighs. It took all of Mae's strength not to push her back onto the bed and part those thighs, and worship her like the princess she was. This woman was royalty, and she deserved the world. Despite herself, Mae was falling in love with her best friend, hard and fast. Not just the family love she felt for Kiel, something more. She thought that maybe she wasn't ready, but she had been waiting for Ophelia her whole life. She wanted everything with this woman. She wanted to give her everything. She led Ophelia to the bath and helped her in. Mae watched as she sank below the water and sighed as she leaned her head back. Lifting her head back up Ophelia winked at her.

“You could join me,” she said as she sat up fully, and let her body come out of the water a bit. Just enough to show Mae her assets. The water trickled off her.

“No,” Mae said firmly, but gently. She snatched one of the soaps she laid at the side of the bath. She started to rub it between her hands into a lather before finally running her hands over Ophelia's skin. It was as soft as she thought it would be. Her hands skillfully slid over Ophelia's wet skin and washed away the gore from the night. She lathered soap into her hair, washing away the crusted blood. Ophelia tipped her head back, her breath getting heavy, her breasts rising out of the water again. Mae's restraint nearly gave way. Gently, she pushed her back beneath the water. Mae helped Ophelia rinse her hair.

She rose from the tub, water glistened over Ophelia's body. Mae's breath hitched and stuck in her chest. She grabbed the robe and wrapped it around Ophelia quickly as she tried to keep her thoughts clean. Mae took her hand and led her back into the bedroom. The girls lay on the soft bed. They sank into it, as if the bed itself was waiting for them to be together. She pulled one of the thick blankets around them. Then and only then, Mae

finally allowed her resolve to break and her hands to wander. She caressed curves and dips. She ran her fingers up and down, causing Ophelia to shiver. Slowly, she dipped her head down, lightly pressing her lips against Ophelia's. With a sigh, her lips parted, and their tongues danced around each other. Their kisses started getting hungrier and harder. Breathing hard, Mae broke the kiss. She regretted it instantly.

“Get some sleep, Princess,” she whispered into the dark.

“I'm not even the slightest bit tired.” Ophelia yawned, curling against Mae's body.

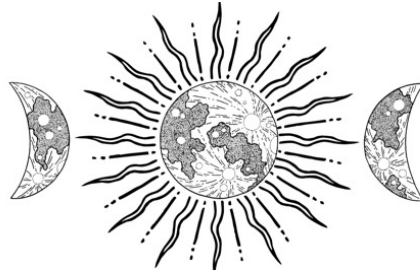
“You are, so sleep. I'll be here when you wake,” Mae spoke into her hair.

“Do you promise?” Ophelia asked, sounding suddenly terrified. Mae took her hand and grazed her lips across Ophelia's knuckles.

“Under the Moon, by the Three Eyes of the Lady, I promise.” Ophelia seemed satisfied by this declaration and snuggled into Mae's side; she closed her eyes, shutting out their piercing blue. Mae watched as Ophelia's breathing evened out before her own eyes felt heavy.

“I do love you, Lia, and when we're out of this I'm going to find a way to show you,” she whispered to the room, before finally falling asleep.

The Lady of Darkness



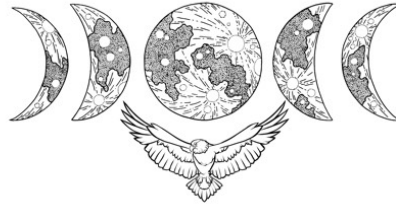
Drip, drip, drip.

She thrashed against her restraints. Primal screams ripped through the room they echoed around her, making it feel like there were a million of her, all trapped. Her feet connected with stone repeatedly as she tried to pulverize it. Rage blinded her. She was a wild animal, caged. She pulled until her wrists were bleeding, the tangy scent reached her nose, which caused her to pull harder. She would rip her own limbs off to be free of this prison. The pain caused stars to form in her eyes. She melted her skin over and over. She finally felt the stone behind her start to crack.

She stopped her assault of the room. She took deep shuddering breaths to try and find her inner calm again. One clear thought formed in her mind.

Soon she would be free.

Chapter Seven



The songs of birds reached her ears, gently pulling her from a deep sleep. Early morning sun shone through the window and right into her face.

Well, that certainly is unpleasant. Mae thought to herself. She rolled over and inhaled the scent of lavender. The previous night, although it was only a few hours ago, came flooding back to her.

Why in the Afterworld did I stop kissing her? She scolded herself. She sighed, content, and laid her head back on the down filled bed, folding her arms behind her. She closed her eyes and imagined what would have happened if she didn't stop last night.

Gilded, angel kissed thighs flooded her imagination. Ophelia's entire body clouded her mind.

Too soon she felt movement beside her and turned to see Ophelia opening her eyes. In the sunrise, they were an even more brilliant blue, almost as if they were reflecting the sun itself. Ophelia smiled at her.

"You're still here," she said sleepily.

"Of course, I am, Lia. I promised you I would be." Mae leaned over, gently lowering her lips to Ophelia's. "But now I have to be the bad guy. We really have to get a move on. We've got three full days left and I don't want to be in Varanstalle for two nights if we can help it."

"I know... I just... one more minute please, Maeva?" Ophelia jutted out her bottom lip in the most adorable pout. Mae let out a long breath and smiled. She reached over and brought Ophelia into her arms. Mae pressed

a kiss to her hair; she lay there in peace while Ophelia put her head on her chest.

“I could get used to this,” Mae said.

“You mean, you're falling for me?” Ophelia giggled, lifting her head to wink.

“Yes, I supposed that's what I mean,” Mae said, smiling. “Really, though, it pains me to say this, but our minute is up. We have to get the others up and get a move on.”

Ophelia moved off the bed, she let her robe fall to the floor, and ran her hands over her body. She turned to face Mae and lowered herself onto her lap.

“Are you sure we have to go now?” she asked breathlessly, as she started to move her hips into Mae's lap. A soft moan escaped Mae as she grabbed Ophelia's waist.

“Yes,” she said firmly, “I am sure. It's killing me but, I am sure.”

“I know,” Ophelia started. “I just love to see you breathless because of me.”

“Lia!” Mae jumped up from the bed and chased her around the room. Ophelia laughed gleefully and grabbed her gown off the floor.

“Come on Mae. Let's go wake the others.” Despite the lack of sleep, Mae felt like she was ready to take on the world. Kiel, Róisín, and Orion met them downstairs. Mae was rummaging through the bar to see what she could find.

“Alright, I've got porridge, porridge, more whiskey, more porridge.”

“Hmmm,” Róisín said, putting a pale finger on her chin. “I think porridge.”

“I guess I'll save the whiskey for later.” Mae said, as she gathered four chipped bowls together.

“This sure beats dried fruit and eating outside,” Kiel said. Food ran down his chin dripping back into his bowl.

“Tell that to Orion.” Ophelia laughed as she handed the bird some fruit and meat.

“Today we must make it through Varanstalle. We have to get as far as we can. I really don't want to run into anything in there in the dark if we can avoid it,” Mae said, bringing down the chipper mood everyone was in.

“I told you they won't bother us,” Róisín replied, as she scraped the last of her meal out of the bowl.

“Yes, you say that, but honestly Ró, when was the last time you were in Varanstalle?”

“Uh... three hundred years ago?” she replied thoughtfully, tapping her chin again.

“Three hundred?” Ophelia widened her eyes, staring.

“Yes, I told you all I was centuries old. Five to be exact.” Róisín shrugged.

“*Five hundred!*” It was Kiel's turn to stare.

“I understand how five centuries can seem like a long time, for you all will only live as tiny fragments in my world, but mama and papa have existed for millennia. I am only a child, compared to them. Though, I will never leave this form. A blessing and a curse.” She sighed, looking wistfully out the window.

“So,” Mae started. “I've got the blood of a Daemon, and I probably won't even get to live past eighty? But you... you get to just... be. Forever?”

“Maybe eighty-one,” Róisín said, chuckling. “Most cambions get themselves into some kind of trouble that they perish at a young age. There have been rumors, speculation really, that if someone in your position were to live a quiet life, they could live for centuries. Two or three perhaps. No one has really tried.”

“Quiet life...” Mae stared out the dusty window of The Porch. “Wouldn't that be nice?” She became quiet for a moment. She took another spoonful of porridge and stuffed it into her mouth. Through her food, she said, “Well, pack up everyone. We've got a forest to conquer.”



The mid-morning sun did little to cut the chill in the air. Mae wrapped her heavy green cloak around her shoulders. They stood at the Southern edge of Varanstalle. She strained her ears and listened. She could hear the clicks and growls of animals she probably had no name for. She pictured large insects that were ready to suck her body dry of its blood. She imagined there were any number of creatures that were ready to tear her limb from limb and turn her into a snack. She heard a low howl; the sound carried to her ears on the wind. *Wolves.*

“Well, you know what they say. No time like the present. Look alive people, enchanted forest ahead,” Mae said. She handed Kiel her crossbow.

Why had no one else brought weapons? Oh right, because no one else has them.

She set a foot inside the forest. The outside world seemed to disappear around them. Varanstalle took them within its grasp, holding tight. The trees bent and curled together, trapping them inside. Ophelia took out her map and opened it. The fold lines looked brittle from being unfolded and refolded again and again. Brow furrowed, she turned around in her spot.

“Lia... have you ever read a map?” Mae asked, taking the map from her and turning it the right way. Ophelia blushed and took that map back.

“Look here,” Mae said, pointing. “This is where we are. This is where we need to be. About a day's walk, probably a day and a half, since we will have to unfortunately stop for rest at some point.” Mae dragged her finger to the other edge of the forest on the map.

“The Whispering Valley should be right here,” Róisín said, coming up behind them. She stabbed her finger into the map nearly tearing it in half. “Then Darkrael. Then... *home*.” She finished, her voice became quiet, taking on a child-like quality.

The group pressed on; hours passed marked only by the growing shadows. Mae judged they had been walking for about four hours, putting them around midday. She stepped over a root and stumbled. Her mouth opened to scream as she smacked the hard ground. As she sat up and rubbed her cheek, she heard a low howl, followed by another and another. Soon it sounded like they were surrounded.

“Wonderful,” she grumbled, rubbing her cheek and struggling to right herself as she looked at her three friends. “We better get moving. That sounds like a pack, and it sounds as if they haven’t eaten in a long time. Despite this whole sort of trust between you and me, Ró, you haven't been back in this forest for a long time and I'm just not taking any chances.” She took a few more steps, and she heard a snarl and a crash. Orion let out a piercing cry as something thudded through the foliage around her. Towering above her was an eight-foot beast. White fur stained red, a look of wrath on its face. The creature's teeth snapped at everything in its path. She saw the wolf lock its eyes on Ophelia. It let out a harrowing growl and plunged toward them. Mae spun around and grabbed Ophelia, who was just standing there screaming.

“Come on, come on, come on, go, go, go!” Mae cried, shoving Ophelia hard to get her moving. “Orion! Fly!” she shouted. The eagle took off and circled around the treetops. The wolf let out another howl. This time it was pitched higher, sounding hurt. It left Mae's ears ringing in the silence when it stopped.

“Wait!” Róisín cried. She stepped in front of the monster and held her hands out.

“Ró! Get out of the way!” Kiel shouted, as he drew the crossbow and ran toward her. Róisín held her hand up, Kiel skidded to a halt just feet from her.

“Kiel, please just wait.” She said patiently. She turned toward the wolf, and she held out her hand. The wolf continued to snarl and snap, coming close to taking Róisín's fingers right off her hands.

“What are you doing Ró?” Mae called out.

“Get over here now! Seriously!” Kiel cried, making a move to grab the girl.

Róisín ignored them, her attention on the wolf. The white animal would have been beautiful under any other circumstance. Its eyes, though angry, were a deep violet. Its feet looked like they were dipped in the night itself, black fur faded into white halfway up the creature's legs.

The forest was unusually quiet now that the wolf's howls had turned to whimpers. The great creature flopped down in front of Róisín, its head lolling to the side, It licked and nipped at her legs. The already small child Goddess now looked even smaller next to the giant wolf. She gently laid its head in her lap and ran her hands over its glossy fur.

“You're okay, little one,” she cooed at the wolf. She scratched behind its ears, the wolf's foot thumped against the ground, bouncing Mae from her hiding spot.

“Little? Are we looking at the same thing?” Kiel said. Mae's vision went black, the entire forest turned to night before her eyes. In front of her Róisín glowed a pale silver. Shadows crept out of her hands, reaching toward the creature in her lap. The shadows twisted around the wolf, dipping in and out of its skin. The wolf was entirely wrapped in ribbons of shadows. Its injuries were receding. Blood was left behind, but otherwise the wolf was healed.

“I'm sorry, you'll have to clean that up, okay?” Róisín said to the wolf, giving it another affectionate pat. The wolf looked up and licked her across

the face, it's tongue almost the size of her head.

"Hey now! I said *you* have to wash that off! I don't need a bath." She laughed. She bent her head down to the wolf's and touched the foreheads together. She whispered something in its ear. Mae, Ophelia, and Kiel made their way over to the wolf and the child Goddess in awe of what they just witnessed.

"What in the world, Ró?" Ophelia breathed out.

"I am a Goddess; I can give and take life. It is my blessing, and my curse. I told you I created the Wolves of Varanstalle. I told you to wait. I know these creatures," she replied, turning back to the wolf who was falling asleep on her lap. "This is Jolienne. She is the alpha of this forest; she and her pack reside to the East. Something tried to take her out when she found me. All my wolves can sense when I am in Varanstalle. I told you all they will not bother us. Jolienne will be joining us to the border of the forest. That's as far as she can go."

"Jolienne doesn't look ready to be moving at the moment, Ró." Kiel pointed out.

"Then I guess we better eat some lunch," she replied.

At the word *lunch*, the group heard a crash from the tops of the trees. Orion dive bombed the forest floor. He landed and paced, digging his talons into the ground. He squawked at Mae for treats.

"Always you and food, isn't it Ri?" Mae said, laughing.



They found a moss-covered clearing; lush green flora covered the area from top to bottom. It looked like they were in a soft, green cave. Kiel stretched his long body out on the ground.

"It's almost as comfy as those beds. Who would abandon that place, anyway?" he asked.

"People with too much money and too little care, flitting from one project to the next," Mae said, her expression turned dark.

"Do you know who owns that building, Mae?" Kiel asked. He sounded surprised.

"You could say that. I *know* them for sure. They don't know me though. Got six other kids to watch over and love." Mae rolled back on her heels.

Her boots sunk into the squishy ground. The fresh scent of new plant life reached her nose. She sniffled.

"Oh. Your parents," Kiel said, "well. No more questions then." He folded his arms behind his head and closed his eyes.

"Mae, you need to eat something," Ophelia said, sitting down beside her.

"I'm fine." Mae picked at the ground, recoiling as a slug crawled over her fingers, leaving behind a sticky slime trail.

"Please Mae, just eat something," Ophelia begged.

"Fine," she grumbled. She picked up a piece of meat and shoved it into her mouth. She chewed but didn't taste anything, the food turning to dust in her mouth. She wasn't sure why she was so angry, but she was. Maybe it was Kiel asking about her parents, but more than likely it was because she was out of her element here. She had absolutely no idea what she was doing. Something felt off. There was a clawing in her head she couldn't shake.

"Mae," Ophelia said, gently turning her head, her hand pressed against Mae's cheek. "What's wrong? Please talk to me."

"I don't know Lia. I feel weird here. I feel like I'm losing my mind." She turned her eyes away from Ophelia, not wanting to see the disappointment there.

"When you feel that way, look to me. I am always here for you. I promise you; we will get out of this." Ophelia bent her head, touching Mae's forehead with her own, she pressed a kiss between her eyes.

"You know Princess," Mae started, smiling as Ophelia made a face at her. "I really am falling for you; you make it so hard to stay away." She scraped her fingernails lightly along her golden shoulder. Ophelia drew her into her chest. As she ran her hands through Mae's hair, a sense of calm washed over her. She felt like she was at home, finally. At the very least, Ophelia will always be her calm. Mae lifted her head. She kissed Ophelia and silently sent a prayer to the Lady and the Prince for bringing this girl into her life.

They ate in relative silence, enjoying the chirps of songbirds as they flitted from tree to tree. Now that the wolf, Jolienne, was no longer hurt the forest seemed to come alive. Small animals poked their heads out from burrows to watch the group. A few were brave enough to scurry up to the group and steal the crumbs that fell to the ground.

After devouring his fill, Orion slept with his head on Mae's shoulder. She absent-mindedly ran her hands over his glossy black feathers, keeping her anger at bay. This beast had been her friend for so long now, her constant companion. She couldn't imagine a morning where she didn't wake up to his grunts because he was hungry. She couldn't imagine not watching him as he preened his black and gold feathers. Now, however, there was someone else she could picture in this image. A white-haired beauty, sapphire eyes opened and looked at only her every morning. Mae was so afraid to open her heart again, but she was ready to take the plunge. Ophelia made her want to take that chance.

"How far do you think we are from the edge of this place?" Róisín asked after a long silence, breaking Mae's daydream.

"Not far," Mae replied. "We'll be out of here in a couple hours. I figured you would know the forest better though, Ró, you left wolves here and all."

"Yes, but three hundred years ago Varanstalle was smaller. It has grown, it swells with magic now. I can feel it pressing at me from all sides. It's dangerous. We should keep our eyes open." The small Goddess looked around her. She tried to see past the trees, but every time they moved away from one area the branches would curl in on themselves again. Was the forest trying to lead them somewhere? Mae supposed there was only one way to find out, that was to keep going forward.

Magic? Is that what I'm feeling? Mae wondered.

The shadows grew longer, the winter chill set in deeper. The group trudged on through Varanstalle. A few times, Mae could see flashes of fur in her peripherals. She wondered just how many wolves occupied the forest. She was suddenly very glad to have Róisín with them. She was also glad that the child kept her promise that the wolves indeed would bring them no harm. She watched as the wolf named Jolienne bent her head down, Róisín grasped her fur and climbed onto her back. Yawning, she nuzzled the great beast's neck. It didn't take long until she was half asleep upon Jolienne's back.

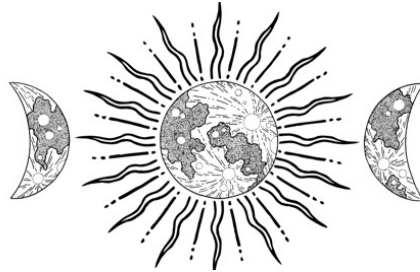
Mae figured in terms of a God, that Róisín was probably the equivalent of a mortal seven-year-old. The trip was taking its toll on her. They walked on in silence for a while longer. As the light faded from Varanstalle, the wolf suddenly flattened her ears back and snarled at something beyond Mae's vision. Panicked, Ophelia pointed to something in the trees ahead of

them. A hooded figure, its cloak covering its whole body, sat atop a massive deer. The deer's skin was rotting away in places, leaving exposed bone and muscle. The deer's eyes were black fathomless pits, Mae felt like they would suck the soul out of her if the creature was given the chance. Her stomach dropped out; her lunch threatened to make a reappearance. She gasped as the figure removed its hood. The same endless pits for eyes sat in a head that was more skull than skin. The figure opened its mouth. The sound that came out sounded like a thousand lost souls, children burning, and being flayed alive. It sounded like death itself. Mae clamped her hands around her ears, before the sound abruptly cut off, leaving her ears ringing.

“Mae,” Ophelia whispered, “what is that?”

“That,” Mae started, looking at Róisín pointedly. “Is a Reaper Rider.”

The Lady of Darkness



Drip, drip, drip.

She arched her back, pulling against her restraints. It seemed like such a futile effort at this point. She heard footsteps coming toward her.

“Well, well, well, My Lady.” Balo spat at her feet. “I just wanted to inform you that despite her best efforts, your little bitch of a daughter is back under my capture. If you do not figure out a way to bring Lucien back to me, I will kill her. I will pull her apart piece by piece. Her screams will be like music on a summer night. Her blood will paint the walls. Do you hear me, *Mother Moon*? I will destroy your world. I think I will start with that pretty little golden eye of hers. I do love how it shines.”

No.

She snarled again as she pulled against her chains. She tried to reach for Balo, she just wanted to wrap her fingers around his neck and squeeze the life from him. She felt the stone give way just a little more.

“Fuck you Balo. You will not get away with this! Do *you* hear *me*? I am a Goddess Balo! I control your afterlife. Fuck you and fuck your son.” She jumped to her feet. The dirty cloth slid down off her black eye, the one that sat in the middle of her forehead. She lunged at Balo again, only to be brought up short by the Silvered Iron chains.

“I will ruin you!” she screamed, spit flying from her mouth, her anger washed over her in waves.

She took a step back; she could see the blurry figure of Balo as he wiped the spit off his face and calmly leveled his eyes with her.

“You are in no place to threaten me. I control the board. Tick tock, My Lady, better come up with a plan soon. I promise you this. First, it will be your daughter. I will tear her apart. I will dance to her screams. I will then find your precious lover, and I will end him, too. I will break everything you love.”

Her vision was red now, her mind turned to a life without her precious daughter, without her love. She had already lost one daughter, stolen as a baby, unable to find her. It felt like a piece of her heart was missing. Maybe it was. Breathing deep she tried to bring her rage under control. Just a little longer she had to play this game of his. A little longer before she was free. The stone behind her gave way more and more each day.

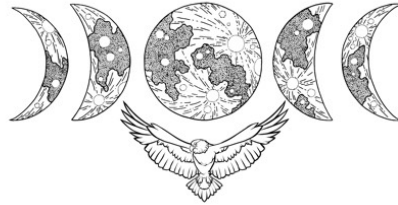
“Alright Balo, if it's a plan you want. Then it is a plan you shall receive.

Chapter Eight



“Run!”

Chapter Nine



“You said they didn't exist anymore Ró!” Mae shouted, stumbling over a branch. Running away from the creature, hoping she was not running toward more.

“I didn’t think they did! It's been *three hundred years!* Get off my back!” Ró screamed back, clutching Jolienne's neck fur and hanging on as they crashed through the forest, branches breaking off in the large wolf's wake. Mae heard a scream behind her. She turned just in time to see Ophelia fall to the ground. Her dress snagged on a fallen tree.

“Mae!” she cried, terror etched on her face, reaching her hand out. Mae vaulted back over the branch she had just managed to stumble over; she ran back to Ophelia. She slid down on her knees through the mud and grabbed the silk of Ophelia’s blue dress. Mae heard the seams rip, but they didn't give way. She started to panic, her hands shaking as she frantically looked behind Ophelia's shoulder. Mae could see that two figures had joined the first. A blue glow surrounded the group. The deer-like creatures were snorting and pawing at the ground, their breath leaving their bodies in puffs turned visible by the cold air. The figures mounted their steeds and fanned out across the forest floor.

“Mae! Please!” Ophelia sobbed, clawing at the dirt. Mae tore her gaze away from the Reaper Riders. She shook off the panic that was seizing her body. She had to save Ophelia! Mae grabbed her dagger, and quickly sliced through the fabric, yanking Ophelia off the ground. Róisín had brought Jolienne around, picking Kiel up on their way.

“Take her! Get out of here! Go North.” The words sounded harsh coming from her mouth, the cold air constricted her throat. Fright was making her light-headed.

“What about you Mae? I can’t lose you!” Ophelia cried. She grabbed the cotton fabric of Mae’s shirt and tried to lead her toward the giant wolf. Mae gathered Ophelia into an embrace. She looked into her blue eyes as she tried to squash down the sickening feeling that this may be the last time she ever saw them.

“Go, please. I’ll be fine. I’ve got Orion. I’ll probably make it out of here before you do,” she said, trying to stay brave in front of the woman she loved. Róisín and Jolienne came to a stop beside the two girls.

“Up you go.” Mae helped Ophelia onto the wolf’s back, nestled between Róisín and Kiel. She laid her head on the child’s back, her face was shadowed, she looked exhausted and terrified. Tears were running down her cheeks as she reached for Mae’s hand.

“Be careful, okay? I love you,” she whispered. Fresh tears dripped onto the wolf’s back, darkening her fur from white to silver.

“I...” A terrible scream brought Mae up short. She could smell the Reaper Riders now, the stench of death clung to them. It made her eyes water. The smell crawled into her throat, gagging her as it stole the air from her lungs. “Go!” she cried; her voice sounded strangled.

She put her fingers to her mouth and let out a long piercing whistle. She heard Orion crash down through the trees. He screeched as the wind kicked up, causing Mae’s hair to whip around her face. She watched as Orion grew to accommodate Mae on his back. She looked at the Reapers. They appeared to not move but got closer every time she looked at them. She could see their faces from where she stood, frozen as she gripped Orion. They were half rotted away, the bone underneath a stark white against the blue glow they seemed to emit.

“Fly Ri!” she screamed, and they took off fast from the ground. Mae locked her arms around Orion’s neck to keep from falling off as they burst through the trees and into the starry sky. She let out a breath that she held the whole time. It left her body like fog in the early winter air. Mae felt herself relax for a moment. She gazed out at the sky above her. Stars twinkled in the sky, a map of the Heavens displayed itself before her. Silent and black above them. They were safe.

That was when the first arrow flew. It whizzed past her head. She could hear the whistle so close to her it ruffled her hair, taking a few strands off in the process.

Gods! Can no one aim well enough to miss my hair!

Orion screeched and banked hard left, Mae scrambled to hold on. The ground spun wildly below her. Another arrow was loosed, it veered off, missing the pair by a few feet. The fourth, fifth and sixth arrows followed the same way. The pair maneuvered left and right avoiding damage.

Everything was quiet for a moment. Mae relaxed a little, but kept her eyes on the treetops below them. She led Orion to the North, toward the edge of Varanstalle, toward safety. They flew in silence, the only sounds were Mae's ragged breaths and Orion as he shifted his feathers to make another turn.

She heard Orion let out a cry before she realized what was happening. Three arrows were shot toward them simultaneously. One caught Orion across the eye, leaving a large gash in its wake, a bloom of red spread over his face making his already black feathers darker. The final two arrows slashed him across the chest, a shallow wound opened up. Orion buckled as the third arrow clipped his wing.

Mae screamed as they started to plummet toward the earth, mixing with the cries of her beloved eagle. They hit the trees hard with Mae's back taking the brunt of the fall. Orion spiraled after her. They smacked into and broke branches all the way to the ground. She landed on the hard packed earth with a thud, the breath completely knocked out of her. She felt her head swimming. The world had gone silent. Orion had landed with his wings sprawled out over her legs. She sat up as quickly as her injuries would allow.

"Ri? Orion! Wake up, please!" she wailed, the forest sounds rushed back to her. She clamped her hands over her ears to try and drown out the noise. She shook Orion, but there was no response.

"You ungrateful fucking beast! Wake up! Do not leave me like this!" She continued to shake him desperately. She finally noticed the shallow rise and fall of his chest. She let out a painful wail, relieved as she fell against him and listened to his heart beating.

Maeva.

She looked around her in the darkness, whipping her head around so fast she felt dizzy. She hunched over, putting her head between her knees,

and wished for the spinning to stop.

Maeva.

She heard her name being called but could not locate a source. Mae decided it must be voices in her own head. She must have hit harder than she thought on the way down. She turned back to Orion, his eye was slashed through. She had never considered whether the bird could heal himself or not. She certainly hoped so.

Maeva. No, it wasn't a voice in her head.

“What! Show yourself you bastard! What do you fucking want with me?” Rage filled her, her vision blurring as she pounded her fists on the ground.

We do not want, not anymore. We do provide the answers you seek, perhaps to the questions you have not thought to ask yet.

“What does that even mean? By the Lady, what is going on?” She touched her forehead and felt a bump. She must have caused a concussion on the way to the ground. Was she having a fever dream? She decided she must be hallucinating.

Maeva of Elecara, you are cambion by birth. You may not understand the repercussions of your actions, but you stepped into Varanstalle of your own accord. It is now time for you to deal with the consequences.

“Consequences? of coming into a forest. What are you going to do? Make me chop a tree?” She let out a frustrated noise, digging her heels into the dirt.

Turn around Maeva, see your future.

“Oh, for fuck...” She turned; her thought cut short as she watched the three figures move toward her on soundless feet. They appeared to be floating across the moss-covered ground. She couldn’t even see their knees bend. Two of them looked to be male, one female, although it was hard to tell with the hooded cloaks. One of the figures was shorter, noticeably more slender. The deer, the ones she thought were massive, were much more than that. At least ten feet tall, their antlers stretched toward the sky, adding another five or so feet to their overall height. Their skin looked flayed along their hind quarters. Muscle and sinew poked through in spots where the fur and skin had decayed. White bone showed through along its neck. Instead of a face, a gaping skull stared down at her. She couldn’t help but stare into the bottomless pits the thing had for eyes. She imagined all her worst nightmares coming to life in those eyes. The deer pawed and

snuffled at the ground. To her surprise they acted like their very alive counterparts. However, where they pawed at the ground death followed. Moss and small plants crumbled beneath their feet. Turning to black ash, the moldy smell of decay seeped out and all around her, her stomach clenched. She felt like she was going to be sick.

She tore her eyes off the deer and turned toward the three figures, people she supposed, who stood before her now. She stood, rising to her full height, which was not very high to begin with. She still had to crane her neck up to see their faces. Dark hoods covered most of their features. She could see the black holes where eyes should be. She felt a sense of calm surround her, a sense of belonging. She also felt completely and utterly petrified.

You are born cambion, of Daemon and Human. They call you a beast, shun you for blood you cannot control. Your parents left you to your own devices. We know that you turned to petty theft and crime to fill your days. Fletcher taking you under his wing. One of the Reapers spoke into her mind. She didn't even detect movement from its mouth. She was frozen in her place.

Do you know what you are Maeva? What you are destined to become? Asked another, one of the males she assumed, since the voice had a deep baritone that rattled around in her skull.

"What are you going on about? Yes, I know what I am. My parents made it painfully clear I was an abomination. You also just informed me of my own life. Not sure what else you want to hear." She clenched her teeth, her jaw aching from the effort of not screaming. The forest pulsed around her.

Maeva, you are not listening. Do you know your history? Do you know your destiny?

"Enough with the riddles. You shot me, him, with an arrow. Let's drop the dramatics, okay?" She waved her hand around. The Reaper seemed to sigh, a whistling noise coming from its chest cavity.

Cambions are born of Daemon and humans. You know the stories, Maeva of Elecara, in the beginning there was only the Moon. Created by The Cosmos themselves. Our Lady of Darkness is The First Goddess, and it was just her for centuries, before the Cosmos gifted the Afterworld with another, a God of Light, Prince of the Sun.

Long ago, when the Lady was young, she was lonely. Souls would come to her realm, but they would shun her, looking only for their loved ones. The Lady of Darkness was worshiped in the mortal realm, sacrifices made in her name. Something she had come to expect when they crossed over, however when souls entered the Afterworld, they did not even thank her, did not appreciate that they had eternity before them. The Lady grew bitter. Feeding into her rage she created Daemons.

These creatures served one purpose only: to torture and maimed souls. Our Lady of Darkness is a complicated being. In the beginning she tried to be forgiving, feeling that most souls deserved a second chance, if they lived a life in service to her name, to ultimately be 'good'. However, once she realized that being worshiped in the mortal realm did not bring her happiness when her people came home to her, she lost herself.

Anger filled her to her core. She started to lose herself, her mind warping with her rage. She was deranged, her mind lost. No soul would get their second chance, not unless they swore themselves to the Lady of Darkness, to serve her forever. New souls would come to the Afterworld, faced with two choices. Take on their nightmares over and over for all of eternity, or serve the Lady... As Daemons.

To ensure that she would be loved in mortal life and mortal death, she sent her newly minted Daemons to the mortal realm to do her bidding. Ironical, considering the alternative.

However, Daemons are hard to keep under lock and key. You see they still held some of their humanity. Some would search for their loved ones, trying to hide from the Goddess for as long as they could. This did not end well for them. They would be rounded up, shackled and thrown to the Hell Water. Others would abandon their humanity almost completely, however their hunger for love still remained. They mated with humans, charming them into bearing children for them. This is how you came to be. The Reaper took a pause, as one of the others picked up the story.

Your blood runs dark, your thoughts run darker. We can see this. You have now started your own path to destruction. Death will become you; did you not feel it before? When your knife slipped into that soldier's skin? Parting it and draining his essence? The call will grow harder to ignore Maeva. You will live your life slowly spiraling toward madness. Anger and rage will fill your days. When you perish, you will return here to

Varanstalle. You will be one of us. This is your destiny. This was your destiny as soon as your foot hit the forest floor.

“Excuse me? I will not ever stink of death like you do. How even? No. No, that's not. No. I won't. I can't. I...” Mae felt defeated. She had just been joking with Róisín about how she'd die young. Now she sat here and stared her future in the face. Her shoulders slumped forward. She felt tears prick her eyes, as they slid down her face, she tasted salt on her lips. She didn't want to become like these creatures. She didn't want death to follow her every step.

“I'm... I'm supposed to finally be happy. I'm supposed to finally...” *love her.* She finished in her head. “What do you want from me?” she whispered, the words barely leaving her mouth.

We do not want, Maeva; we have no need for want. We only serve as a warning. You came to Varanstalle. You will return here again.

“You want me to be *aware*, so you tried to kill my friend?” She swept her hand to Orion's form on the ground.

He is not dead. He will live.

“Just... let me go,” she begged, pushing her fists into her eyes to try and stop the tears from flowing.

You will return here, Maeva of Elecara. One day.

“Go!” she screamed, flinging herself back on Orion's body. Two of the figures turned to leave. The third, the female looking one, hesitated. She came up behind Mae and put a skeletal hand on her shoulder.

There may be a way to avoid this fate. She told Mae, *speaking nothing of this to anyone.*

It is said that when the Lady of Darkness fell in love with the Prince of the Sun; he taught her grace, soothed her vengeful soul. It is said that she can spare cambions who are destined to come here from this fate. You may have been unaware when you came here that in doing so, you bind yourself to the forest. That by doing so, you would become the last defense before The Whispering Valley, but now you know. There is rumor that the Lady of Darkness will spare cambions that she deems true of heart. I can see your soul, Maeva. Stay on your path, return the child, open your heart to the love you feel inside. Do not let the darkness take over. You may avoid this fate yet.

“Why are you trying to help me?” Mae asked, distrust laced her voice.

This is not living, Maeva. We are walking death. I do not wish this on anyone. Even if your father is Daemon, this does not have to be your path.

The female figure stood up and left. No footsteps marked her passage. Mae only knew she was gone because the forest came to life with the sounds of small animals and insects.

Tears streamed down her face, turning the dirt to mud as they fell. She struggled to get up off the ground.

Return the child? Open my heart to love. Don't let darkness take over? Like when she killed those soldiers? She was just trying to keep everyone safe. She didn't want to. It just... happened.

The thrill was undeniable, though.

“Ri? Orion, do you hear me? I need you to shrink so I can get us out of this forsaken place. Please Ri.” Tears still flowed freely down her face. *Plip, plip, plip.* They landed on Orion's feathers, running down and mixing with the golden tips. He stirred and lifted his head. He let out a small cry and shrunk, smaller than she had ever seen him before. He was the size of her hand. It scared her. She prayed to The God of Light that he would be okay. Exhausted, Orion nestled into Mae's arms.

“Well, let's get the hell out of here.”



She reached the Northern border of the forest about an hour later. She trudged through the last of the undergrowth, her boots tangling in the undergrowth. It was as if the forest didn't want to let her go. Which she supposed was true if the Reapers were to be believed. She let out a grunt as she hit the ground, clutching Orion to her chest so he wouldn't get hurt more. Sprawled out on the ground, she cursed whichever Daemon gave her balance. She heard footsteps coming toward her, vibrating through her body. She sucked in a breath as her injuries flared. She tried to crane her neck, having to move slow to not aggravate the pain further. She saw Ophelia, followed closely by Kiel and Róisín. Concern etched in all their faces, they all looked like depressed statues.

“Mae!” Ophelia cried, running up to her. “You're alive! We thought... well... Kiel thought you were gone. I knew it, though. I knew you hadn't died!” She crushed Mae to her chest, her heart beating frantically. Mae winced and pushed away.

"I'm fine Lia, really, it's... it's..." Tears formed in her eyes again as she unraveled her arms from Orion's tiny form.

"Oh, my goodness, Mae! I'm so sorry I know how much he meant to you. I can't believe he's gone." Ophelia set a delicate hand on her shoulder, sending sparks down Mae's arm.

"Gone? No Lia, he's not gone. He's just injured. Badly, he was shot out of the sky. I... I don't know how to help him." Mae's chest caved in. This was all too much. She was terrified of losing her companion.

"May I?" Róisín inquired, dropping to her knees on the cold ground beside Mae.

"I don't know Ró, I just... I just want to sit with him and keep him relaxed so he can heal," Mae said, stroking Orion's feathers.

"Mae, I can help. I know I can." Róisín pleaded, tugging on Mae's arm. The small Goddess loved the bird. In the short few days they had known each other they had formed a bond. Mae's jealousy flared. She crushed it back down. She looked into Róisín's eyes as they silently pleaded to help. Reluctantly, Mae passed the limp form of Orion over to the shadow girl.

"Please be careful," she begged.

Róisín brought Orion out into a clearing just past the border of trees, overlooking the valley below them. She carefully laid him down in the plush, green grass. The early rays of the sunrise glinted off his feathers, turning the tips orange, as if they were on fire. Róisín gingerly laid her hands on his chest. Mae watched in amazement as her hands disappeared, turning to shadows, wisping through Orion's feathers raising them up. His body started to shimmer; the light caressed his body. Mae saw the gashes along his body close, stitching back together as if they never existed in the first place. Orion started to stir. Slowly opening his green eyes he blinked, confusion marred his face.

"Orion!" Mae cried. She ran to him, cradling the bird in her arms. She stroked his feathers, clasping his talon in her hand. "I thought I lost you, you wretched beast. How dare you try to leave me!" She sobbed into his chest. Róisín lifted her hands to Orion's face. He screeched and bit at her fingers.

"I just want to heal your eye! Mae is right, you are an ungrateful bird," she complained as he snapped at her fingers again.

"I think he wants to keep it. Makes him look dangerous," Mae said laughter bubbled up in her chest, chasing the tears away. She gathered the

eagle and the child Goddess in her arms, squeezing them as tight as her wounds would allow.

“Thank you Ró,” she whispered into the girl's flame red hair.

“You're welcome.” she replied, smoothing the raised feathers on Orion's back. “There's something about your Orion, Mae, something very interesting. He is the only bird I have ever seen that can shape-shift... he shouldn't be able to heal others the way he healed your arm earlier.”

“What do you suspect Ró? He's just a bird. If you haven't noticed though, there's magic everywhere. We just tramped through an enchanted forest full of Reaper Riders. Some things just can't be explained.”

“And some things can,” Róisín said.

“Okaaay. Well, when you come to some kind of conclusion, please feel free to clue the rest of us in. Right now, let's get down into the valley and away from this Gods forsaken forest.” Mae gathered Orion in her arms and helped him perch on her shoulder. He pecked at her ear, growing silent as the group trudged down the hills before them, toward The Whispering Valley.

“Why do they call it the Whispering Valley?” Kiel asked no one in particular.

“You'll see,” Róisín replied, a conspiratorial note to her voice.

“*You'll see*,” Kiel mocked her with a smile. Lifting the child onto his shoulders he ran down into the valley, Róisín screaming in delight the whole way down.

The Whispering Valley lay before them, lush rolling green grass spread out under their feet. The fresh smell invigorated Mae, making her feel alive again. She scanned the valley below. Another furthest point from them a giant cliff rose into the air. From where Mae stood it looked like it disappeared into the clouds, a sheet of marble with no breaks. A river flowed through the valley at the bottom, crisp blue water sparkled in the brightening morning light. Large boulders lined the edge of the water, bright orange flowers sprouted between the cracks. She assumed this was Darkrael, although she could not be certain. As in her mind the river was dark, desolate and void of life. A breeze blew through the valley, a sound like a million whispers tickled her ears. Mae assumed this was how the valley got its name. Dotted along the sloping hills were wild lilies in every color imaginable. The sight was unlike anything Mae had ever seen. Who knew that flowers could be silver and violet! There was nothing like this

that could compare in the mortal realm. Mae stooped down and picked a small bouquet of the unique flowers. She rushed to catch up with Ophelia. Pulling at her waist she spun her around.

“Here,” she said as she shoved the flowers at her.

“Charming,” Ophelia quipped; one perfectly sculpted eyebrow raised. “What's this all about?” She took the flowers, bringing them to her sloped nose. Mae caught the floral scent in the air. It reminded her of Ophelia when they were at The Porch.

“Listen...” Mae started, blowing a curl out of her face. She stopped Ophelia, taking hold of her dainty wrist. “Sit with me, please.” Ophelia hesitated. She looked toward Kiel and Róisín as they flew down to the bottom of the valley, laughing and screaming all the way down. The voices floated on the breeze.

“Come on, Lia, we’ve got a few minutes. Can we have some peace before we move on?” Mae pleaded. She put on her best pout, hoping to sway her best friend. Ophelia let out a long breath and sat down. Mae plopped down beside her. She shucked off her long sword and daggers. They sat in the grass looking less menacing than they did in Mae's hands. She started to itch, missing their weight at her side already.

“Lia... I, I’m sorry. I really messed up. I should have told you from the start. I want you, every part of you. You are my sun, my life, my breath. I... I love you,” Mae tumbled over her words. She wanted to hide as Ophelia looked at her. She was quiet for a minute, two minutes, five minutes. Mae started to fidget with her daggers, she contemplated put them back on and running down into the valley. Run away from the embarrassment. “Lia, say something, please,” Mae whispered. Ophelia stared at her for a few more rapid beats of her heart. Mae felt a trickle of sweat down her spine. She sighed and began to stand. Ophelia grabbed her hand.

“I feel like I have been waiting an eternity to hear you say that. Does this mean?” Ophelia stopped short. She chewed on a fingernail, not wanting to finish her question.

“Yes.” Rising from the ground and drawing Ophelia up with her, Mae looked into her sapphire eyes.

“Ophelia, Princess of Elecara, *my princess*, I swear to love you for all of my days. However long or short they may be.” Ophelia grabbed her around the waist and lifted her up, so Mae was standing on her toes. Orion

chirped in annoyance, having to jump down from Mae's shoulder to avoid being crushed. Lips crashed against hers, Mae sighed, opening her mouth she shivered under the feel of Ophelia's tongue dancing across hers. A heat stirred once again low in her belly.

"Mae! Ophelia! Come on," she heard Kiel yell, breaking the passion of the moment.

"Kiel, I could fucking murder you right where you stand," Mae murmured, knowing he couldn't hear her from where he stood halfway down the hill. She took Ophelia's slender fingers and laced with hers. Together, they helped lift Orion back onto her shoulder. She made a sound of annoyance as she glared down the slope to where Kiel stood, waving his arms animatedly around.

"Well, that'll have to wait won't it. Come on, we better catch up."



They made good time across the vast valley. Finally it felt like they had caught a small break. The sun rose higher into the sky; the sky turned a crisp blue, there was not a cloud to be seen. Looks were deceiving though. Despite the brightness of the sun the cold crept in, worming its way into Mae's bones where it settled there. Snow would fall soon.

As they reached the far edge of the valley, the cliff rose in front of them. It was an intimidating rock face. Now that they were closer, Mae could see that it was in fact made of a marble-like stone. There were no hand or foot holds that she could make out. Mae glanced around her. The valley was breathtaking. She wished she could just lay down in the long and fall asleep in the wildflowers.

"Welcome to Darkrael," Róisín said, her voice barely above a whisper. The group approached a gigantic stone archway through the rock in front of them. Towering statues were carved into the face of the cliff. Mae tipped her head back to look at the stone figures. Hooded, in long robes.

Does everyone have to wear a robe? She thought. She continued to crane her neck back, one of the figures' faces was a skeleton. A jarring smile carved into its stone face. The other looked to be a young man, the plains of his face carved beautifully. Both figures had skeletal hands. Mae assumed they were supposed to be depictions of Daemons. What else would look like that? Each figure held a scythe crossed above the archway.

She took one more long look at through statues and swore she saw their eyes glowing a faint red.

So this is the doorway to the Afterworld. She thought to herself.

“Pretty easy to get to, if you ask me.”

“Pardon you, cambion?” Róisín said, a powerful note in her voice reminding Mae she was a Goddess, not the child she appeared to be.

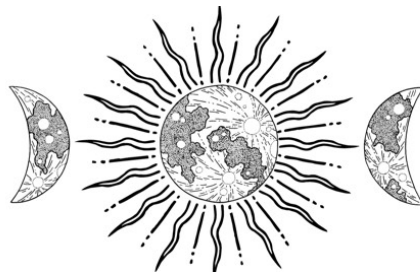
“Did I say that out loud? Oh, I’m so sorry. Let me try again. *It’s pretty easy to get here if you ask me,*” Mae said again, louder this time. Her voice echoed off the cliffs around them. *Pretty easy to get here* repeating itself before the whispers replaced it.

“I would mind your manners if I were you, Maeva of Elecara,” A feminine voice sang from behind her. The noise was like a bell. Mae turned to see a beautiful woman step out of a small cottage that sat nestled at the foot of the statue carved like a man. Her long brunette hair was threaded through with flowers and vines, as if the valley itself had claimed her as its own was. Her eyes shone a deep violet. She smiled at the group, her eyes wrinkled slightly, giving away her age.

“Welcome,” she started, “you have reached the gate to the River Darkrael. You all look very wary, please join me, we shall eat, you shall sleep. I am the Mistress of this Valley. I serve the Mother Moon and the Prince of the Sun. My name is...”

“Mother?” Ophelia interrupted, stepping out from behind Mae and Kiel.

The Lady of Darkness



Drip, drip, drip.

“Balo, you wretched fool. I cannot think under these conditions. If you want your son back, you're going to have to let me out of here!” she screeched into the empty cell.

Footsteps. She tried to peer through the dingy room to see who was approaching her. The cloth binding her still off her one eye. However, everything appeared to be shrouded in darkness. She needed all three of her eyes unbound to see properly. Her only downfall.

“Curse the Cosmos for blinding me.” She understood *why* she needed all three eyes to see clearly, for when judging a soul you first had to see them. Once she tied the satin sash around her head, she could hear them as well. Judging souls was a lengthy process, but one that needed to be done properly. If one of her eyes was ever damaged, she would be unfit to judge and therefore unfit to rule the Afterworld.

Even more reason to find my daughters. She thought to herself.

She turned her head toward the footsteps that were getting louder.

“Oh, My Lady,” Balo *sang*. “Never say I am not one to accommodate.” She heard more steps shuffle toward her. She was roughly lifted by her chains. Hands grabbed her upper arms with force, clammy skin rubbed against her. She snarled, snapping her teeth at whatever she could.

“What do you think you are doing? I am a Goddess! How dare you!” She thrashed, lashing out at whatever she could find. Her elbow made contact with something hard.

A scream.

“Fucking Gods!” Balo snarled. “Take her to the tower.” She could feel hands all over her body. They held her arms, snapping the chains that encircled her wrists. She slumped forward, resigning herself to whatever came next. Her whole body went numb as the fight left her.

Their footsteps echoed off the stone around them. Her bare feet were wet from walking through puddles on the dungeon floor. She hoped it was water and not something else. She could hear the moans of the other prisoners. Their cries of anguish stabbed into her; every groan felt like a spear in her heart. She could feel a few of them on the brink of death, teetering between this realm and the next. The men made a tight circle around her as they brought her up a set of stairs. They emerged at the top, and she tried to lift her arms to shield herself from the bright light. She felt the chains pull tight, her arms only raising to shoulder height. It had been so long since she had seen the sun. She shut her exposed eye against the light - she couldn't see much anyway - she tipped her head up. The Sun's warm light fell over her pale skin, warming her for the first time since she was captured. She heaved, tears forming in her eyes. She missed him so much.

Another set of stairs. Spiraling further and further up, she was disoriented when they finally reached the top.

“You should be thankful for the great King Balo's accommodations,” one of the men said beside her.

“*Thankful?*” She felt laughter bubbling up in her chest. “Thankful? Are you really that blinded that you cannot see the evil in your own king?”

“Balo is great,” she heard him reply.

Rolling her eyes as well as she could, there would be no arguing with these men. They were loyal to the king. Nothing would change their minds. She let herself be led into a room; she heard the ring of her shackles as they slammed home as they imprisoned her in another room.

“*Mother Moon.*” She heard Balo clap his hands together. Footsteps scurried out of the room; the soldiers must be leaving. “I hope you find your new room more *accommodating*,” he snarled once the men had left. “Consider this your final warning. Figure out a way to return Lucien to me. Consider *this...*” He threw something that landed with a soft thump at her feet. “incentive.”

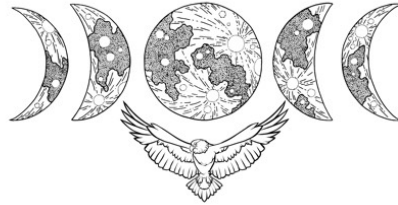
She felt around on the floor once the King had left the room. Picking up a tiny, severed finger. She let out a cry. *Róisín*.

I cannot undo what has been done. I cannot free Lucien. She thought to herself; she considered how the rules of the realm bound her. She was entwined with the magic of the Afterworld; *she* could not undo a death that happened as the result of something *from* her realm. It would destroy her in the process.

Could someone else, though? Sitting down on the floor, she felt the hardwood underneath her. It gave a little under her weight. Almost a cushion compared to the stone from before.

At least that damned drip is gone

Chapter Ten



This was the former queen of Elecara? She didn't look like the regal woman Mae had pictured in her head. She wore a simple dress, her hands calloused from years of living in the valley. The woman, Isabelle, led them into the cottage. Vines climbed up the walls. Entangling with each other along the ceiling. The entire cottage appeared as if it had sprung out of the ground itself. It smelled of dirt after the rain, and Mae could smell the faint hint of worms.

This is Ophelia's mother? She couldn't see any of Ophelia's features in the older woman. Mae had never met the Queen of Elecara, but she wasn't surprised by this. She thought the woman was dead, the entire Kingdom thought she was dead. No one would have ever thought that she was living here in The Whispering Valley acting like nothing had happened. Mae was in disbelief; how could this woman just be playing house out here by herself? Did she not comprehend the devastation she caused Ophelia? Mae felt anger simmering just below the surface.

Mae watched as Isabelle lit a fire. A small voice inside her spoke.

You could just push her in there. Mae looked around, sure that someone had heard her thoughts. Her body vibrated. Ophelia looked at her and gave her a small smile. The voice in her head silenced itself. Isabelle grabbed dried leaves and flowers out of various sized jars, she crushed them up with a mortar and pestle. Using a fine piece of fabric, she poured hot water over the concoction. The aroma of dandelion and cinnamon filled the

cottage, drifting over to Mae's nose, it tickled her and made her sneeze. Bringing the pot over to the table, Isabelle poured the group some tea.

"I'm sure you are all wondering who I am," she spoke calmly, like someone who had once ruled a kingdom. She looked at each of them in turn. Her gaze stopped once she looked at Mae.

"Wondering who you are? What are you doing here? Why you lied... Lia was deves..." Mae started, Ophelia lifted her hand to stop her. Mae looked at her, an incredulous look crossed her features.

"*Mother*," Ophelia whispered, her head bent down. A curtain of hair separated her from the rest of the room. "I thought you were *dead*." She cried; tears glistened as they rolled down her cheeks. Mae wanted to wipe them away, kiss her, and make all the pain go away.

"It would appear I have some explaining to do. Come, please, by the fire-side will be more comfortable for all of you." Isabelle looked to Kiel who was shivering. He blew on his hands that were turning purple at the tips. Isabelle led the group through an archway that was covered in wildflowers; they all sat around the glowing fire. Mae pushed her hands palms out to the flames and rubbed them together to get the blood flowing again.

"Where do I even begin?" Isabelle asked, more to herself than the room. A small hand tugged at her skirt. A few leaves shook loose and drifted to the floor blending into the leaves already littered on the ground.

"Might I suggest you start at the beginning?" Róisín said, turning her eyes up at the older woman. Mae could see the sparkle from across the room, she was enthralled with this woman. Mae remained apprehensive.

"Ah yes, of course, that would be the best place to start." She smiled down at Róisín, giving the child an affectionate pat on the head. Róisín swatted her hand away, but smiled back. Isabelle settled back against the chair, her face turned wistful, making her look years younger than she was.

"Let me start by saying Balo was not always the way he is now. The king you all know is not the one I married.

We were *introduced* when I was seventeen, at a wonderful party held by the King and Queen, Balo's father and mother, to celebrate the prince's coming of age. The party was not what stood out in my mind. Sure it was extravagant, the royal family going all out for their son, the heir to the kingdom.

He was handsome, twenty-one years of age. Deep brown eyes, with an intelligence that was beyond his young mind. A mischievous sparkle behind them, a soul who was older than his body appeared. When I tell you he took my breath away, I am not lying to you. All the air went out of my lungs when I laid my eyes upon him. He radiated strength. Muscles rippling underneath the finery he was forced to wear. He shifted uncomfortably almost as if his shirt was too tight around his biceps. The red and silver colors of the kingdom, setting off his eyes, a sharp contrast to his dark hair. Our eyes met across the room. I swooned, despite myself, as he made his way over to me.

When I tell you it was a fairytale, I mean it. We danced all night until my feet ached, and I begged him to sit. He led me out on the balcony, and we sat under the stars. We talked about our lives until the sun poked up over the horizon." Isabelle drew in a breath, sighing for her lost life.

"Ophelia came to us, a year after we were wed. Balo was not happy about this. He believed in his father's vision of Elecara. Only a male could be an heir. Only a male could rule. When Lucien was born, I convinced myself Balo would be the loving man he was years ago, that he would finally see Ophelia and care for her. For a while, he was different. He cared for both the children. This didn't last though. Before long he became a man possessed, wanting to make sure Lucien was taken care of. He loved Lucien, showered him with gifts, spoiled him with affection. I tried my best, Ophelia, to make sure you knew you were loved. I am so sorry my dear, I failed you." Ophelia walked over to her mother. She embraced her. Mae squinted, still trying to see the resemblance between the two women. She came up short. Ophelia must have gotten her looks from her father.

"It's okay mother," Ophelia's voice barely above a whisper, making her sound like the young girl who has lost her mother all those years ago. "I do remember. I remember you trying."

"Thank you, my love," Isabelle replied, tears running down her face. She looked to the rest of the group, her eyes falling on Mae, breathing deep again as she continued her story.

"I am sure you have all heard the stories whispered throughout the Kingdom. That I drowned Lucien in Hell Water. That I killed myself because of the grief. However, what you do not know is the truth."



“Lucien and I had taken a walk that fateful day. He was running along the sand, chasing gulls, sand kicked up by his feet, settling into his brown curls. Lucien and I always had a troubled mother son relationship. He would constantly pull pranks on the palace staff, and I made it clear to him I did not appreciate this. I did not shower him with gifts the way his father did. For this reason, he turned his attention to me. I became the victim of his antics. He was a child, believing that love was shown by how many gifts one gave you.

“Mama,” he said on that last morning. His eyes were shining with mischief. He grabbed my hands and pulled me forward. “Come,” he demanded. Leading me toward the water.

“Lucien, stay back from the water. You know we cannot go near the edge. Hell Water is dangerous.” I tried to distract him, directing him back to the white sand. “Perhaps we could dig for shells.”

“No mama! Come. See.” His eyes burned into me as he brought us closer to the edge of the water. The waves mere inches from my feet. He ran around me. I thought he was playing. I thought he was trying to pull another prank, however he pushed me toward the water.

I threw myself to the side and Lucien tripped past me. It all happened so fast, I tried to reach him, pull him back from the water before he...” tears flowed down Isabelle's face, darkening the front of her dress turning it a deep forest green.

“You don't need to finish, Isabelle,” Róisín said, placing a hand on her arm. The child Goddess' eyes shone with unshed tears. “I am sure we can figure out the rest.”

“No, no child, it is okay. I will finish.

I remember sobbing on the beach, wanting to reach out to Lucien, snatching my hand back quickly from the Hell Water. He may not have loved me the way he loved his father, but he was my child. I grew him in my womb. Before long, I heard you, Ophelia, running down to the beach. I knew your father would not be far behind. I knew he would end me if he found out the truth, and so I ran.

Days later, the Prince of the Sun came upon me. I was a mess, caked in mud and hiding out near the edge of Varanstalle. He bent down beside me, cupping a hand on my shoulder.

‘Come, Isabelle. I know what happened’. I finally felt safe. He brought me here. When I walked into the valley, this little home you see around

you sprung up from the ground. Before my eyes, the cottage bloomed out of the ground like a flower. I was amazed at the magic I saw before me. I knew there were women in the realms who could harness the elements, never before, though had I seen that power used without someone to wield it. At that very moment, I swore myself to the Lady. I took on the task of guiding souls to the banks of Darkrael. I keep them company until The Keeper takes them. I have been here ever since.” Isabelle finished her story; the words sucked the life out of her. She looked older, as if centuries had passed in the time it took to tell her tale. Her shadowed eyes turned to Ophelia.

“My love, I am so sorry. Everything that has happened to you for the last few years has been my fault. If I was not a coward, if I stood up to your father...” She wrung her hands, tapping her fingers over her lap.

“Mother, it is okay... I understand, really, I do. I know how father can get.” Mae was in awe at how quickly Ophelia forgave her mother for abandoning her. They stayed quiet for a while. Their tea was long forgotten. The scent had left the room. The only noise was the crackling of the fire and Kiel as he inhaled another cigarette. What was there to say? They just learned that the whispers throughout the kingdom were wrong.

Kiel yawned, stretching his arms toward the ceiling.

“It is late,” Isabelle started.

It is? Where in the world had the time gone? They got here in the early afternoon...

“There are rooms down the hall. Unfortunately, there are only two extras. You two can take the rooms with the two smaller beds.” She said to Kiel and Róisín. “Ophelia, you can stay in my room, Mae, you can have the room with the other bed.”

“I do not want to impose. I will sleep out here,” Mae said, making sure her tone meant that what she said was final. Ophelia may have forgiven her mother, but Mae wasn't sure she trusted this woman, and she couldn't forgive so easily after she watched Ophelia shatter when she thought about her mother.

“If you wish.” Isabelle stood up, her nonchalance indicating that she didn't care either way where Mae slept. She hadn't been expecting company, anyway. The tension left her shoulders as she headed toward her room, content with the fact she didn't have to let her abandoned daughter sleep there after all. “I will see you all in the morning. I will escort you to

the banks of the river.” Her door shut, the lock sliding into place. Kiel broke the silence that had settled over the group, he took Róisín's hand in his, his tanned, calloused fingers closing over her small ones.

“Come on Goddess. You may be five hundred, but you need sleep.”

“I do not, mortal. I am a being of shadows. We do not need sleep. You, on the other hand...” Her short arms are stretched behind her back as she let out a noisy yawn, the rest of her argument forgotten. Kiel held his hand out before scooping her up and carrying her to the room. Orion stared after the pair, jumping down from Mae's shoulder. He looked up at her and then over to the closed door that Róisín had disappeared behind.

“Well, I can't keep you from her can I? What kind of person would I be then? Go on.” Orion chirped happily and hopped after the child. Mae watched him go. As his tail feathers brushed the ground she wondered if his wing was still sore.

It must be. He takes every chance he can to fly. She decided she would work up the nerve to speak to Isabelle in the morning and see if she had any herbal remedies to help ease his pain.

Mae and Ophelia were left in the silence that followed their friends. Mae stared into the fire, the flames performing their own acrobatic routine. She watched Ophelia out of the corner of her eye. The soft light danced across her face, accentuating her beauty. It outlined her sloped nose and full lips in red. Mae noticed Ophelia's eyebrows were pinched together.

“Are you alright?” Mae blurted out, her strained voice cutting the silence.

“It's just a lot to hear, you know? I always thought Lucien was the perfect child. I hated my mother when he passed. Blamed her. I don't know if she's telling the truth, but why would the Gods give her salvation if she wasn't?” Ophelia sniffed, staring back at Mae. Her blue eyes were rimmed red from the tears she had shed over the past days. Under her eyes were bruised a deep purple. Mae couldn't help herself, even when she was exhausted. Ophelia was beautiful.

“I don't think she would lie. What would she gain?” Mae replied. She thought about what Ophelia had said. Why would Isabelle lie? Mae couldn't find a reasonable explanation; she may not have trusted the woman, but she figured she was at least telling the truth.

"I know... I just... I guess I am struggling with everything." Ophelia shuddered, trying to slow her breathing. They sat together in silence a while longer. Slowly, Ophelia leaned into Mae until her head rested against Mae's shoulder. Heat raced along her body; a buzzing noise filled her ears. She took a deep inhale. She let herself get drunk on Ophelia. She wanted to run her hands all over her golden skin. It was the only thing she needed.

"What happened in that forest, Mae? You looked awful when you met back up with us," Ophelia asked, shattering Mae's fantasy. Mae thought back to Varanstalle. Flashes of death and Reapers overwhelmed her mind. Her head spun. She didn't want to talk about destiny or death so instead she concentrated on the things that stood out to her the most.

"Being in there Lia, seeing those *things*. Getting shot out of the sky. All of it made me realize I need to stop running from the good things sitting right beside me."

"What do you mean?" Ophelia asked. Breathlessly, she leaned in closer. Mae could still smell the light scent from the soap left behind on her skin from their time at The Porch. Her mind flooded with new images now. Golden curves replaced death. Her heart started to speed up, threatening to beat right out of her chest and onto the floor.

"I mean... I mean I have already told you, Lia, that I love you, but I'm sick of words. I want to show you. I need to love you now, not later." Ophelia flicked her blue eyes up to Mae, holding her breath. Mae closed the distance between them. She lightly touched her lips to Ophelia's. She relished in their softness, tasting the tea that Ophelia never finished. Mae decided then that she now loved cinnamon. She let her hands roam, caressing Ophelia's hips, she pulled her close and lifted her up into her lap.

"Are you sure?" Ophelia whispered the question, not wanting to break the moment. Instead of answering Mae kissed her harder. She parted Ophelia's mouth deepening the kiss. Her heart fluttered as their tongues danced with one another. Mae had kissed women before, but nothing had ever compared to this. She was soaring. Small moans escaped Ophelia's mouth as she moved her body on top of Mae, pushing her hips into her lap, a movement that threatened to send her over the edge. She slipped Ophelia's dress down her shoulder; grateful she hadn't bothered to put the corset back on. Mae leaned back, admiring the beautiful woman in front of her. She took a breast in each hand, and slowly massaged them. Everything about Ophelia was kitten soft.

Ophelia dropped her arms around Mae's neck. She arched her back and leaned in to kiss her. Her hands twisted in Mae's black strands, pulling tight. Mae groaned at the pain as it ignited a fire inside her. Ophelia moved her hips again, rocking against Mae.

"Lia," she moaned against her lips. She took Ophelia's bottom lip into her mouth and nibbled. She grabbed Ophelia around the waist laid back, bringing her beautiful body down on top of her. Their legs intertwined around each other. Ophelia ran her fingers up Mae's ribs, causing her to shiver. She fumbled to get her shirt off. She wanted to bare everything to this girl. Her strength, her vulnerability; Ophelia could have it all. She wanted to give Ophelia her heart. Together their hands explored, grazing along planes and dips. They caressed curves, leaving burning trails of passion in their wake. Mae trailed a line of kisses down Ophelia's neck, rolling her over so Mae was on top, looking down into her sparkling face.

She lifted herself up on her hands, one planted on each side of Ophelia's waist. She was entranced by Ophelia's body. She explored with her mouth, kissing and licking, which caused small tremors to run through Ophelia. She continued to kiss down to her stomach; she ran her tongue along the outline the Ophelia's hip bones. She pushed herself up onto her knees and started teasing Ophelia. She nipped and kissed along her thighs. She felt hands twist into her hair, lifting her head to look up at Ophelia's face.

"Something I can do for you Princess?"

"Mae," she moaned, "please!"

That one word was all she needed to hear. Parting Ophelia's thighs, she licked and kissed her core. Swirling her tongue around she tasted the sweetness of the woman she loved. She could hear Ophelia's breath coming faster now. Low moans left her perfect pink lips. Reaching around her, Mae supported Ophelia's lush bottom under her arms. She continued to kiss and drag her tongue up and down. Ophelia bucked against her chasing her mouth, panting. Mae licked and teased. She never wanted this to end. She had finally felt the bliss of being with the woman she had admired from afar for so long. She brought a hand back around, and dragged her fingernails down Ophelia's thighs, her thumb rubbing small circles on Ophelia's swollen bud. She could feel the muscles in Ophelia's thighs tighten around her head like a vice grip. This encouraged Mae to go faster. She used her tongue to part Ophelia's folds and taste her heat.

Ophelia's stomach muscles pinched together as her moans became louder. Mae felt Ophelia's slickness run down her chin as she came to a climax crying out her name.

"*Mae!*" Ophelia shuddered against her. She held tight to Mae's hair. As she calmed down, Mae crawled back up, lying beside her, and tucked Ophelia's head against her chest. Ophelia drew small circles with her fingertips on Mae's stomach, a small fire burning wherever she touched.

"Where did that come from?" Ophelia asked, still trying to catch her breath.

"It is what you deserve, Princess, someone who loves you, someone who wants to show you," Mae said with such diction that Ophelia had nothing to say back to her, instead she kissed Mae's cheek. Ophelia's fingers continued to trace circles, further and further down Mae's body, sending shivers down her spine. Her hand grasped the band of her leather pants, trying to slip her hand beneath. Mae didn't want her to stop, but she knew they needed sleep.

"Lia," she moaned quietly, forgetting the words she was going to say next as Ophelia's fingers brushed her mound. She felt Ophelia slip inside her, pumping her fingers, the heel of her hand pressing against her causing waves of pleasure to wash over her and drown her in ecstasy. The heat began low in her belly, it set her nerves on fire. All her muscles tightened. Ophelia's kisses grew hungrier. She nipped at her bottom lip. Mae could taste the metallic blood as her lip split. The pain added to her pleasure. Ophelia rocked her body into Mae, panting in her ear.

"I love you," she whispered as her thumb circled Mae's sex. Mae felt the heat spread through her entire body. Every part of her was on fire. She had never experienced anything this amazing in her life. As she climaxed and felt her release, stars exploded behind her eyes. Her moans became louder as spasms rocked through her body. She could feel the sweat running down her sides. Her thighs tightened against Ophelia's hand, clutching to her as if her life depended on it, Mae slowly began to still. She kissed Ophelia again, covering her lips in a whisper soft embrace. She gently kissed both her eyelids as she came down from a high.

They fell asleep curled into each other, legs and arms entangled. Mae felt a calm envelope her, as she listened to Ophelia's steady heartbeat, fur blankets kept them warm as the fire dimmed to embers. She felt safe, secured.



Kiel came crashing into the room the next morning, stumbling over a table. A whistle woke Mae up with a start. She opened her eyes glaring as he flopped himself down into a chair. He had a bowl of something in his hand. The smell drifted toward Mae, making her stomach rumble. She hadn't eaten since the night before.

"Well, it looks like you two had a good night." He winked in Mae's direction.

"Would you keep the commentary to a minimum, Kiel?" Mae said through gritted teeth, as she reached for her shirt, slapping her hands against the hard floor. She made sure Ophelia was still covered by the fur blanket.

"I'm just saying..." He laughed.

"And I'm just saying shut up! *Please*," Mae said, throwing a shoe at him. Embarrassment heated her cheeks. Not from the night before with Ophelia, but for the state Kiel found them in that morning. They were supposed to be fulfilling a prophecy after all. They should be concentrating on that, not on making love by the fire. Mae did not regret the night before, not even a little bit. Ophelia chose this moment to wake up.

"Oh, good morning, Kiel," she said, seemingly unbothered by the fact she was nude, with nothing but a blanket between her and the man they considered family between them.

"Are you looking for a show?" It was Ophelia's turn to wink, which caused Kiel to blush a deep scarlet, lowering his head toward his breakfast.

"Nope. I just... seriously! I'm happy for you two. Really, I am. About time, if you ask me."

"We didn't," Mae said flatly. Ophelia laughed out loud. She stood up, taking the blanket with her, she walked toward the room where her mother had slept.

"Hey!" Mae shouted.

"Your shirt is right there." Kiel pointed to a lump on the floor. Mae scurried to pick it up and throw it on. She wasn't embarrassed by her body, but Kiel was pretty much her brother.

They sat around the table in the kitchen, eating porridge and fresh eggs from the chickens that she hadn't noticed when they came in yesterday.

Isabelle had prepared a paste for Orion to have spread on pieces of meat. She explained that this would help keep his pain at bay, he would be flying within no time. Mae was elated. She hated to see her companion grounded. As they ate, Mae asked Isabelle about the journey ahead of them.

"All I can tell you is I am here to get you through the gate. I have never ventured beyond the shore of Darkrael, but one day soon I will. Now, I'm sure that even though the Lady and the Prince will be ecstatic to have their daughters back." Isabelle stopped short, looking around the kitchen nervously. "I'm sure they will be thrilled to have one of their daughters back," she quickly corrected herself. "I must stress to you that staying hidden is your best option. New souls are often very confused, and they can lash out if they suspect the living among them. Best to fool The Keeper while you're at it lest you make a scene. I will provide cloaks for you all, your eagle though... Maybe he should stay behind."

"He won't," Mae replied, "but he won't be seen either." She closed the door on a reply.

Ophelia and Róisín walked through the threshold at that moment. Róisín finally looked like she got some sleep. Ophelia had her hair pulled back in an elaborate braid and was clothed in a long, simple burgundy dress; she pulled her sleeves down her arms as she sat down to her own breakfast.

"Wow." Mae dropped her spoon.

"What?" Ophelia said frantically trying to smooth the fabric on her stomach.

"You look beautiful," Mae said, making her blush. They ate in silence for a few moments. The only sounds were spoons hitting chipped porcelain and the occasional slurp when Kiel missed his mouth. Ophelia finally broke the silence.

"Mother, there's something confusing me, about what you said last night." Isabelle looked up, stunned.

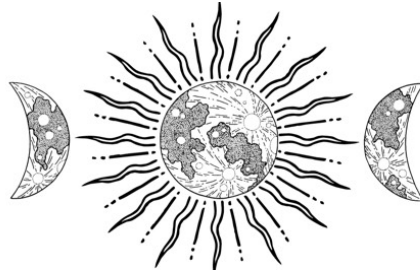
"What do you mean?" Concern filled her face, the wrinkles around her eyes deepening.

"You said that Lucien was *born*, but that I *came to you*. What does that mean?" Ophelia asked.

"You caught that, did you?" Isabelle sighed and pushed back from the table. She came around to sit beside Ophelia, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“I'm afraid, my love, I haven't been completely honest with you.”

The Lady of Darkness



Drip, drip, drip.

She slumped down in the cold water. A handmaid dumped more over her head. The liquid cascading off her in rivulets. It stung the wounds that circled her wrists underneath the iron. She was unable to escape them even here. Her black hair snaked through the water in the bath, she ran her hands through it trying to unknot it.

She could not remember the last time she had bathed. She felt a stab of sympathy for the poor girl who had to help her, but it was fleeting. Her fury returned quickly. She could feel the grime of the dingy basement as it slid from her, shedding like a second skin. Probably turning the water murky.

Late in the night, while she was drifting in and out of a fitful sleep, someone entered the room replacing the dirty cloth that bound her eyes. This morning she was awoken by the handmaid that now dumped ice cold water over her head. The girl lathered soap and tried to rub it into her hair.

“Excuse me mortal!” she seethed. “How dare you touch a Goddess? I should have your hands for that!” The girl squeaked out an apology. The Lady sighed and leaned back against the porcelain tub.

“I apologize as well. You may proceed. *With my hair.*” The hand maid massaged the soap into her hair. It smelled faintly of citrus, flooding her senses with her lover.

He stood beneath the lemon and orange trees in the orchard and would bring her fresh fruit whenever he pleased. The memory spun away from

her as quickly as it began.

When her hair was rinsed, she raised herself out of the bath. The handmaid tried to help her into a silk robe, having a hard time because of the Lady's height and the shackles about her wrists. After a long struggle, she was finally wrapped in the robe and back in her prison.

"You're going to have to take these off for me to dress," she said to the girl as she held up her wrists, "and this." She nodded, indicating the cloth still haphazardly bound around her three eyes.

"She will not," Balo said, stepping into the room.

"Balo." She glared at the King

"Leave us," he said to the handmaid. She heard the girl's footsteps scurry out of the room.

"Lucien," he said, tapping his foot, a hollow sound against the hardwood.

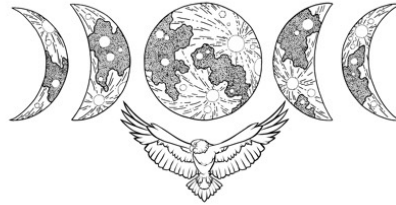
"I don't know how many times I have to say this to you, Balo. *I* cannot undo what has been done."

Someone else, perhaps. She thought, not ready to give away her secret yet.

"Ahh, you misunderstand, *My Lady*," he said, snarling her title.

"Lucien has returned."

Chapter Eleven



“Alright!” Kiel whooped, throwing his arm in the air. “Is this the part of the adventure where we’re told a story and someone’s fundamental core is changed?”

Isabelle stared at him wide eyed.

“*Kiel*,” Mae hissed. “Would you shut your son-of-a-whore mouth?”

“My mother is a wonderful lady,” Kiel replied, lighting a cigarette and taking a deep breath. He leaned back in his chair; the soft morning sun bounced off the angles of his face, making him look ethereal.

“We know,” Mae and Ophelia quipped in unison.

“Would you please tell us, Isabelle?” Róisín said quietly, looking at the rest of them one at a time. Her golden and onyx stare plunging deep into Mae’s chest. She held her small mouth in a grim line, daring anyone to continue with their banter. “I, for one, would like to know what is going on.”

“Of course, Goddess of Shadows.” Isabelle smiled warmly, Mae watched as her friends returned the smile, but in her heart, she still felt like something was off about the former Queen.

Don’t trust her. A voice whispered in her head. She couldn’t puzzle out why though, where were these dark thoughts coming from?

“So, you do have a title!” Kiel exclaimed, clapping his hands delightedly.

“It’s Róisín. I prefer Róisín, or Ró.” The girl looked toward Mae, with a smile.

Mae tried to return her smile, ultimately failing.

“Ahh, little rose. Well, Róisín, why don't you gather everyone around the hearth. I will tell you all the tale.” Mae sat beside Ophelia, fidgeting with her daggers, clenching and unclenching her fists. *What is Isabelle about to tell us?* A million thoughts ran through her head. She looked around the room. The cottage transformed in the daylight. When they arrived before the small home felt welcoming. Now Mae felt like it was holding secrets like the woman who resided here. The dirty wood floors were worn down to a dull shine with use. The vines that twisted together up the walls to the ceiling now made Mae feel trapped. She was starting to feel the urge to run again, but she knew she couldn't leave her friends behind.

Isabelle sat down, her skirts pooling around her. Small flowers and dried leaves drifted to the floor. She folded her hands in her lap, picking at the skin around her bitten fingernails. She did not look like a woman who once ruled a kingdom. She looked beaten down, sad, as if someone had stolen her whole life from her. She stared at each one of them in turn, her violet eyes drilling into them before finally turning her eyes to Ophelia.

“I’m afraid, my love, that I am not who you think.” Isabelle took a deep shuddering breath; Mae could feel her exhale from across the room. She clutched Ophelia's fingers; Mae could feel her own turning numb as Ophelia held on tight. A nervous buzz settled over the room as Isabelle opened her mouth. Her voice was quiet and song like as she began.

“We all know the story; The Moon was created by The Cosmos. The First Goddess, the Lady of Darkness. The Sun came next, The God of Light, Prince of the Sun. They fell in love. It was magic. They had two daughters of starlight and sunbeams, of flame and shadow.

However, there is a lesser-known story, whispered only among the few who are privileged enough to know it. Elecara’s illustrious Royal Family’s feud with the Gods.

Venkalth, the first of his name, the man who settled the kingdom, and became it’s feared ruler. He despised the Gods, for when he settled the kingdom, he wanted to strike a deal. A sacrifice to ensure he would be a beloved king, that he alone would have the adoration of every man, woman, and child he encountered. The Lady laughed at him; she would not make any deals with mortals. She was a Goddess, not a gambler. Instead, to punish him for his greed, she decided to curse him, and his bloodline.

From that day forward, every male born to Venkalth's line would be doomed. They would either die young of a mysterious sickness, or if they made it to adulthood, they would slowly lose their minds. Spiraling further and further until there was nothing left but the shell of the men they once were. Female children, if and when they were produced, would be cursed to suffer a much worse fate. They would die at the hands of their fathers. Once they had lost their mind, they wouldn't recognize their own daughters, seeing them as a threat to the kingdom. It would be considered a great sacrifice in the King's eyes, what they had to do for their kingdom. The girl child would always be murdered in the name of The First Goddess, Mother Moon.

Venkalth raged that the Gods would not help him, that they would laugh in his face, laugh at his hopes and dreams of ruling with an iron fist and being loved. He vowed that he would have his revenge. He vowed to rip apart the Afterworld. He would seek out the Lady and make her suffer. He vowed if it was not him, it would be his bloodline.

Venkalth was a barbaric man, even before he was king. He thought he was above everyone else, and he was not afraid to throw his power around. He swore that he would never take a wife, instead he would use the women of the kingdom to his liking. Each one would walk into his chambers, scared, crying, and begging for him to let them go. They were always forced to make love to him, but they would never again see the sun. They would never leave the palace walls. It is said that you can still hear their screams in the dungeons far below the earth. Where their bodies now lie, encased in the stone forever.

After years of the kingdom's young women being summoned to Venkalth, their families mourning them before they made it to the palace: there was one, instead of being buried beneath the palace, buried herself into Venkalth's heart. Her name was Nola. She was not afraid of Venkalth, instead choosing to stand beside him. It was she who produced an heir for him.

Baltheir.

When Baltheir was a cherub cheeked child of eight, his father told him of their curse. Baltheir grew angry, screamed about how unfair it was. Inheriting his father's vengeance, it snaked through him, coming to live in his bones.

When Venkalth passed, alone in his chambers, it was said he was found with his eyes clawed out. Not wanting to see the horrors that awaited him in the Afterworld for the crimes he committed in life. His ears cut off, for he was driven mad by the screams of the women encased in his walls. Seeing his father this way, seeing a glimpse into his own future, Baltheir swore that he would now have the revenge his father did not.

After Baltheir inherited the throne, the realm celebrated the birth of two Goddesses. One of shadow, one a soft candle flame. The sky alight with a golden meteor shower. The Lady of Darkness and the Prince of the Sun invited all to meet the daughters of Moon and Sun. They held a celebration right here in the Whispering Valley. The entire Kingdom of Elecara, no, the entire mortal realm showed up to show their love to the Goddesses.

Baltheir attended with his wife, a woman he paid handsomely for. His mind was already slipping, for he had decided very quickly that a new heir was needed, and so their own child, the next male heir, was also present.

He saw his chance for the revenge his father was denied. Late into the night, once the celebrations had ended, the mortals had either returned to their dwellings or were far too intoxicated to notice anything, once the Lady and the Prince had settled the tiny Goddesses for the night, he stole across the river Darkrael.

Now, I hear you all asking, how? Well, The Keeper, usually not a man of celebration was very happy for the Gods. He partook in the festivities that evening, having his fair share of wine. He lay snoring gently by the river's edge, his boat unattended.

Once in the Afterworld, Baltheir stole into the palace. There were no guards around the nursery. A regret I am sure the Lady has to this very day.

The sun rose the next morning, and it is said that when it was discovered that one of her precious daughters was missing, the Lady wept tears of starlight for her. Causing havoc to descend upon the Earth. Rivers of lava opened along valleys, destroying everything in their path. Storms ravished the sea, overturning ships, dumping cargo and crews into the churning waters. Mortal lives were ripped apart in the blink of an eye, the Lady wanting them to feel the loss that she did. It was the Prince, who, as he always did, soothed the turmoil inside of her. The Earth calmed, although it still trembled at her wrath. She had to focus. She still had one daughter to raise.”

“That is you Róisín.” Isabelle looked at the child Goddess, despair and warmth warring on her face. Mae followed her gaze, Róisín had tears running down her face, reliving the story of losing her own sister, one she had never remembered and never forgotten. Mae felt a stab in her stomach. The thought of ever losing the family she did have rushed through her. Her own tears formed in her eyes; anger replaced the pain. She would fight for these people. Somehow, she would help Róisín find her missing sister.

“Would you mind filling in this part Róisín, about yourself? Please?” Isabelle asked, putting a protective arm around her. Róisín took a deep breath. She balled her tiny hands into fists and wiped her tears away. She nodded at Isabelle, starting off at a whisper.

“I’m not really sure where to begin. Every day I have mourned for a person I have never met. My counterpart, the peace to my inner war. As for myself, I have already told you all, I am five centuries old. In terms of Gods, I am a child. However, I will never age beyond this body. Why? Maybe because The Cosmos wanted to play a cruel joke, but I suspect it is because in this body I would appear more trustworthy to souls when they came to judgment. I was told by my mama that I am the embodiment of a shadow. Not that I follow everyone around, but that I block the sun. She said, ‘I make it wait, and make it think, before it reaches the Earth.’ As for my sister, of course, I have never met her, so this is only what I have been told. She would be as bright as the sun, and an ethereal young woman. She is the one being that would ‘make a shadow darker, lending to its power.’

“And no before you ask Kiel,” Róisín said, looking over as Kiel lounged on the windowsill. He opened one eye, surprised he was being addressed. A grin spread across his face as Róisín continued, “I am not upset with the body I am in. And yes, I do miss the sister I never met, more than the stars themselves.” She wiped tears from her eyes, the gold one glistening with more unshed tears. “Isabelle, do you mind continuing now, please?”

“Of course.” She handed the girl a handkerchief; Róisín quietly thanked her and waited for her to start talking again.

"My family line does make its appearance here. For you see, the woman Baltheir purchased to marry him was an unremarkable young maiden from the town, a village really at the time. She was full of hope and dreams, wanting to do her duty to the kingdom and produce the next heir.

She tried to love Baltheir, she tried to do right by their child. She tried in vain to make him a better man. That was until she learned the truth.

She was appalled that his husband had kidnapped a child, and a Goddess no less.

‘Do you understand who the Lady is? That she is in her core a malevolent Goddess? Do you understand the destruction you have brought upon this family? This kingdom!’ She cried.

‘To break the curse of my bloodline, I need this child. The Lady and the Prince will pay a handsome price to have her back.’

‘Is that what you think, Baltheir? That by stealing this Goddess, you will be rewarded for her safe return. That you will get to live out your days a hero. I can tell you now, that it will not happen.’ His hand cracked across her face.

‘Would you shut your damn mouth! You are a bought and paid for whore. You belong to me. If you are not standing beside me, then I will consider you standing against me. You will die.’ She ran from the room, tears streaming behind her.

That night, she crept into the tower. Coming upon the tiny Goddess wrapped in a rough blanket. She took the girl, and with nothing but the clothes on her back and bare feet, she ran from the Kingdom. It is said she had help through Varanstalle, but by whom, no one can say. She made her way here, to The Whispering Valley, to Darkrael. She waited along the shore for The Keeper to return, hiding among the souls that gathered at the water's edge. When he arrived, she explained who she was, and presented the baby Goddess to him. He told her to wait at the banks, for he could not let her cross.

She waited, and while she waited, she watched the moon chase the sun across the sky, once, twice, three times until The Keeper returned.

“I cannot thank you enough for trying to return our flame to us, however I fear that it is too dangerous for her to return yet. Baltheir has still sworn revenge against My Lady. This child must be protected at all costs.”

‘And who will protect her?’ the woman asked. The Keeper raising an eyebrow at her, a sparkle in his eye.

‘Oh no! Who am I to protect her? I am but a mere mortal.’ She tried to shove the tiny bundle at the hulking immortal being standing before her. He held his hands out in front of him.

‘You will protect the Goddess of Flame, but fear not, you will not be alone. Although she will not know who she is, she will remain safe with you, for you will have my blessing. I have prepared these herbs that will alter her appearance, so no one will suspect who she is. She will grow again every generation. You will use this to give her a childlike appearance as many times as needed. As for her memories, every time she is reverted to an infant child her memories will dissipate, locked away in her mind, like they never existed.’

‘And the King? And the Kings after him? What of them?’

‘You will give them this.’ He handed her several small vials filled with a pearlescent violet liquid.

‘This will alter their memories and make them believe the child is theirs. It will need to be given to the King and the Prince every generation, so one forgets her, and one remembers her. From this moment on, a female child will be “born” before a male heir. You alone are now trusted to find a woman from the kingdom to bare the king’s son. However, you will always be his mother, for appearance purposes,’

‘But how? I am only destined to be a drop in this vast ocean. I will not live long enough to ensure her safety.’

‘You will,’ the Keeper replied. She felt a fire rage through her then. She will never forget the heat that coursed through her body. White hot heat licking her bones, shooting through her veins, halting her, encasing her, cursing her to this age forever.

‘With each passing king and prince you will have the ability to change your appearance. You are free to create a new name for yourself, but you will always be queen. Go now,’ he said, handing her a satchel to put her supplies in.

‘Protect her, Isabelle.’

“Isabelle?” Ophelia looked to her mother. Mae was shocked. She knew on instinct that something was off about the woman who claimed to be Ophelia's mother was correct. She hadn't been expecting this. Kiel let out a low whistle. He was leaning forward, his hands on his knees. The tension in the room was thick, it felt like they were wading through mud.

“Yes,” Isabelle responded, her voice barely above a whisper. She turned her eyes to the floor.

“Hold on,” Kiel said, “so you’re telling me that at the ball where you were ‘introduced’ to Balo, you were also posing as his mother? What did

you do? Sneak away and change your face, come back, seduce Balo and then become queen all over again?" Kiel stared wide-eyed at Isabelle.

"Yes," She said quietly, and firmly.

"And... you had to do this over and over again for centuries?" Kiel's eyes were the size of small planets as he tried to comprehend the situation in front of him.

"Again... yes," Isabelle responded.

"Well... that is incredibly confusing. Glad it wasn't me." He muttered mostly to himself. Isabelle moved the conversation along. She turned back to Ophelia and took her slender hands in her older withered ones.

"I'm sorry my love, I'm so sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I had to keep you safe."

"No... mother... but that means..." Ophelia shut her mouth; she wrapped her slender arms around herself. She shook her head. "No!" she yelled as tears trailed down her face once again.

"Yes, my love, you are The Goddess of Flame."



"No, no no no no, no! I'm just a normal girl. A shunned princess sure, but normal! You're just my mom. You're not centuries old, you can't be. I can't..." Ophelia paced the floor, wringing her hands, running her slender fingers through her white hair.

"Lia, come on, calm down. Please, we'll figure everything out. Maybe your mom has lost her mind like they say." Mae put an arm around Ophelia's shoulder. Ophelia curled into her, shielding her eyes from the room.

"Maeva. That is very rude. I am not losing my mind. In fact, I am of very sound mind and body, and also offended. Everything I am saying is the truth. Let me show you." Isabelle wandered into her bedchamber. After a few minutes she came back and presented Ophelia with a jar of dried herbs. Ophelia popped the top, and the smell of decay and sweet cherries flowed into the room.

"Dead flowers?" Mae asked, raising an eyebrow. She was in disbelief; Isabelle really was mad.

"I can brew it for you if you like," Isabelle said, ignoring the look on Mae's face.

"This isn't the time for tea, mother! By the Prince you really have lost your mind, haven't you?" Ophelia paced the room; she was starting to shake. Mae feared she would lash out like she did with the soldier.

"There's always time for tea!" Kiel said, suddenly jumping up from the window. Ophelia spun on her heel and glared at him. She stalked toward him, wagging her finger.

"I can't believe you're siding with my crazy mother!" she shouted, stabbing her finger into Kiel's chest. He held his hands in the air, surrendering.

"Enough about the mental state of Isabelle, Ophelia. Can you just let her make you the Gods' forsaken tea!" Róisín shouted, her voice much larger than her tiny body.

"Yeah Lia, inquiring minds want to know," Kiel said. He took another deep drag, his third cigarette since the sun popped up over the cliff. Mae could smell the stale smoke on him, wishing he would quit but not having the heart to take away his one vice.

"Fine! Is that going to make you all feel better? You have all lost it then! I'll drink the damned tea, *mother*." Ophelia's cheeks turned pink with anger. Mae placed a hand on her upper arm. Ophelia spun around, knocking Mae's hand away and stomped into the kitchen.

What in the Lady's name! Mae felt her irritation peak. She glared at Isabelle's retreating back as she followed them. As Isabelle brewed the tea for Ophelia, Mae stood off to the side, tapping her foot. The scent of dying cloves and wild sweet cherries wafted through the room, Kiel sneezed. The sound like thunder in the quiet cottage.

Isabelle brought the steaming cup over and set it in front of Ophelia. Mae watched as her lips made a small o and blew on the scalding drink. She hoped that Ophelia didn't feel uncomfortable as she sat in the middle of the room on display for everyone to watch. Mae knew if she was in the same position she wouldn't be sitting here while everyone's eyes stared, deconstructing. She would be outside screaming at or hitting something. Both seemed like a good idea for the current situation. Orion hopped onto the table and sniffed at the tea, letting out a chirp of disgust he flew back to perch on Mae's shoulder.

"Come on, Lia!" Kiel shouted, breaking the stillness. "Quit stalling. Isn't it about time you *drank* the magic tea?"

Ophelia whipped her head around and glared at him, her eyes softening when she saw his face. His smile was genuine. It reached up to touch his eyes. The dark brown sparkled as he nodded, encouraging Ophelia.

Loyalty. Mae thought, her heart thawed. She loved these people.

Ophelia took a deep breath and let it out slow, a slight wheeze came from her nose. Ever so slowly, she lifted the brittle porcelain to her lips. Her blue eyes bore a hole into Mae as she drained the cup in one fell swoop.

“Huh. Nothing,” Kiel said, his face falling. “Disappointing.”

“Kiel! Would you... Ophelia?” Mae watched, mouth agape, as the girl she loved started to change. Her already bronze skin deepened, the smoky hue becoming more apparent as she took on the soft glow of a candle. Her white hair remained, but the waves looked like they were reflecting the moonlight from within. Blue and violets replaced the pink hue. Her eyes were the biggest change. They seemed to almost melt away. The sapphire color shifted, the blue paling, pinks and oranges threaded their way through her irises, the colors of a sunrise. Mae looked down at Ophelia’s hands. The tips of her fingers appeared to be on fire, flame red and oranges licked their way down her palms.

“Uh... Lia, you should go look at yourself,” Mae said. She stared at her friend in awe. She was beautiful.

She’s always been beautiful. Mae thought as she watched Ophelia stand up and slowly made her way toward the glass in Isabelle’s chambers. The group scrambled to follow, gathering in the doorway.

“What in the...” Ophelia touched her face. The ethereal figure in the glass copied her every moment. Ophelia reached out, the woman also reached out. Their fingertips met on the surface of the glass. “I... you... you were telling the truth?” Slowly, like she was in a dream, she made her way toward Isabelle and collapsed against her chest. She sobbed, heart breaking sounds that crawled their way into Mae’s mind to live there.

“Shh, shh, my love. It is okay.” Isabella patted her hair. She squeezed her tight. Mae felt some of her suspicion lessen, but she still wasn’t sure what to make of the woman in front of them. Ophelia believed her though, so she would try to as well. Ophelia raised her head and looked around the room. The green of the walls turned her skin a sickly green.

“Where’s Ró?”



Ophelia pushed away from her mother and made her way outside. Mae followed her to the threshold, stopping short to let her go to Róisín alone.

The child Goddess sat on the edge of the river, hunched over, her arms hugging her body. She looked very much like Ophelia did those few days ago before this all began. Ophelia walked on her toes, quietly picking her way over. She put a flame glowing hand on the girl's shoulder.

"Ró?" Ophelia said, barely a whisper. Mae had to crane her neck to try to listen to the conversation. She felt like an ass trying to eavesdrop on the two Goddesses, but she just couldn't help herself. The child, The Goddess of Shadow, cried. It was a distressing sound.

"Ró, Róisín... please look at me," Ophelia said.

"Lia... I... I..." She cried, black tears streamed down her face, wisping away like smoke before they could hit the ground.

"I know Ró. I'm sorry." Ophelia ran her hand over the grass.

"Sorry? Why are you sorry? Ophelia, don't you understand?" Róisín looked at her, her eyes wide saucers, they pleaded for Ophelia to understand. Mae hoped that she would.

"Apparently I do not..." Ophelia replied.

"I have been waiting *centuries*. Lifetimes for mortals. My mama, our mother, she never forgave herself for losing you. She always talked about you. Her little flame. My sister, my *twin*. Do you know how many nights I wept for not knowing you? For possibly never knowing you. Ophelia. I... I can't believe it's you." Small arms snaked around her neck, squeezing her. Mae could see Róisín shaking against her chest, vibrating in and out of sight as her shadow power became uncontrollable with her tragedy. This was Ophelia's family.

She has a sister. She's a goddess? Mae thought to herself, watching the girls at the river's edge. *Well, this changes just about everything.* She turned her attention back to the Goddesses as they sat by the river. The temperature seemed to warm a little around the valley as it welcomed its lost Goddess home.

"I'm so sorry, Róisín. I can't say it enough. I'm sorry for everything you have been through. I'm sorry I didn't know, but I'm here. We're together again." She wiped tears off the girl's face, seeming to accept her fate.

Mae watched from the doorway as they sat on the bank of the river for a while. Just being together.

"I need to know something, Ró," Ophelia said after a long silence.

"What is it?" Róisín asked, fear crept into her voice.

"Did you know this whole time? I mean... did you know I wasn't just a mortal princess?"

"I can assure you I did not. I felt there was something different about you, but I thought it was just because you were braver than most mortals. I do however believe that fate brought you to me that night in the basement. I believe that our souls had connected and found each other." Róisín replied, wistfully.

"I guess that would make sense. Part of me always wondered why my father hated me so much... I remember when I was younger, I was wandering the halls of the palace. I passed my mother and father's room and could hear them arguing on the other side. My father raged about a 'filthy Goddess' that my mother hid right under his nose. I never for a second thought it was me. I suppose that's why he locked me away, why he hated me." Mae watched as Ophelia leaned into Róisín.

Mae disappeared back into the cottage. Making her way to the kitchen she fell into a chair. She collapsed under the weight of everything she had just learned. Her bones felt heavy. She knew this was going to be the end of whatever she had with Ophelia.

Well, that's it. She thought. A Goddess! This changes everything. Now not only are we returning one child of the Gods, we're returning two. Ophelia will go back to her family. She'll one day rule the Afterworld with her sister. She is in a completely different world than me. After this, it's back to my empty home. I guess at least I have Orion. And Kiel.

"Hey!" Kiel breezed into the kitchen as if he was summoned by Mae's thought alone. He looked happy; his dark eyes had a hint of mystery behind them. He had combed his pale blonde waves back and out of his face. He sat down in the chair beside Mae and propped his feet up on the circular wooden table.

"Can you believe it? She's a Goddess! Who would have thought? I mean... she's always been pretty, and she's always been so much more empathetic than you and I... I just never would have guessed." Kiel stopped, looking over at Mae. His tone changed. "You alright?"

“Just brooding,” she said, “Preparing for a life without her.” She crossed her arms over her chest and picked absently at a nonexistent piece of thread on her shirt.

“What are you going on about Mae?” he asked. Sitting up quickly he knocked over the teacup Ophelia used earlier. It crashed to the ground, shattering in a tinkle of broken porcelain.

“Look at them, Kiel! They're sisters! Twin Goddesses! They have a realm to rule one day! I'm just a disgusting fucking half Daemon. I'm not even worthy of her,” Mae spat the words out.

“Maeva... come on... Do you really think this is going to change anything?” Kiel softened his voice, like he was talking to a scared kitten.

“It's going to change everything! We're going to take them back to the Afterworld and then it's just you and I, Kiel. And I may love you in a way, but it's not *that* way. I'm happy for them. I am. I'm just...” She hunched over on herself. She felt sick. She felt abandoned.

“Mae. Shut your fucking mouth. She *loves you*.”

“I don't know Kiel. I just don't know,” she said, tears sprung to her eyes.

By the Three fucking Eyes of the Lady, I've been crying a lot lately. Can I just... not. Angrily, she swiped her hand across her face. She could feel the puffiness under her eyes. She didn't even want to look in a mirror for fear of the person she would see staring back at her. Full of anger and hatred, another tragic cambion abandoned by everyone she loved. She didn't want these terrible thoughts, anymore, she didn't want to be whatever the Reaper's were. She feared it would be a fate worse than death.

“We've got to get going. We're running out of time.” She stomped off, childishly making as much noise as she could to quell some of the rage in her mind. She heard Kiel try to protest, ultimately giving up. He grew silent as Mae left the kitchen. The last thing she heard was his sigh and the strike of a match.



The group gathered at the front of Isabelle's cottage. Mid afternoon sun beat down on her shoulders for the first time in days, doing little to lift her mood. She looked around the valley that spread out before her. She

admired the gentle slopes of the hills once again. She wished she could stay in a place like this forever. She wanted to live among the wild lilies that burst their way through the grass. Her heart ached. Just yesterday she was picking those flowers and giving them to Ophelia.

Why are you so stupid? Stop brooding. She's destined for a different life now. She scolded herself. Sighing, Mae stared up at the statues that towered above her.

"The Keeper," Isabelle said. Mae jumped as the woman came up behind her silent as a cat. "He doesn't look like either of these, or maybe like both. They say that The Keeper is the only being older than the Lady herself. Between you and me, I really do think he is The Cosmos himself."

"That would mean he created the Lady? So, he's... Ró's grand-dad?" Mae couldn't fathom the idea of the Gods being like a real family.

"Ophelia's as well, but yes, if my theory is correct then he is." Isabelle handed Mae a cloak, and she drew it about her shoulders. It was a very bland thing, a deep gray. It was so long it pooled around her ankles.

Great. Guess I'll be holding this up. The hood was large enough to cover her face, cavernous enough for Orion to sit comfortably inside. She looked around at her friends as they prepared themselves. All of them shapeless gray figures. She couldn't tell who was who, aside from Róisín who was still the smallest in the group. Orion burrowed his beak into her hair. He pecked her affectionately.

"Thanks Ri, at least I'll have you when this is all over."

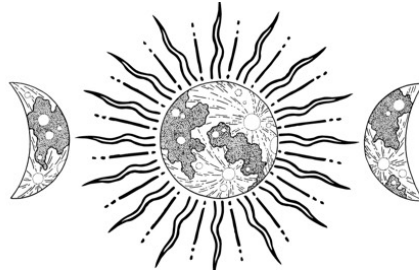
"Alright. We've got a few hours till sundown. The Keeper comes once the sun has fully set and the moon rises. Are you all ready to see Darkrael?" Isabelle said, moving to the front of the group.

"As ready as we're going to be," Mae replied, not feeling the least bit ready. They walked through the arch. Mae could feel the chill set into her bones. She desperately checked to reassure herself that her daggers were still there. She felt a small comfort as she felt the head of the eagle dagger at her wrist. It seemed that this passage went on forever.

Ahead of the group she could see a dim light. They slowly made their way toward it. After some time, it grew bigger, and the group emerged on the other side of the arch. She looked around her.

Darkrael.

The Lady of Darkness



Lucien has returned? How? What does that even mean?

She slumped against the wood floor, the firm flat area causing her lower back to cramp. She pulled against the Silvered Iron, melting the skin off her hands again and again. It had become more of a game to her now than a real attempt to escape. Something to pass the time while she waited for rescue or death. She had resigned herself to whatever came first. She was tired, her soul felt old. One last time she watched as her skin dripped onto the floor, too exhausted to remold her hands, letting the black skeletal joints remain.

After all this time. This is how it ends for me.

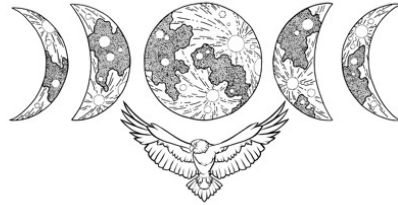
What will happen to Róisín? What will happen to my Prince?

Not even I know what it means to return from the Afterworld. I never thought it was possible. I have never been able to undo something done by my own realm.

In all her millennia, no one had returned from the Afterworld. She feared, for the first time, what would happen to the mortal realm. She feared for the people. A weight on her chest as she imagined the influx of souls who were as confused as she was. She closed her eyes against the rough cloth. She readjusted the grimy dress around her, feeling tears begin to form, black and oil-like they slipped out from under the cloth about her face.

Drip, drip, drip.

Chapter Twelve



The stones of the banks crunched underneath her boots, like cannons in the silence. She first noticed gray. The rocks beneath her, the clouds above her, the river that ran beside them. Everything was grey. The sun had completely disappeared. Mae felt uncomfortable. Darkrael did not seem like a welcoming place to wait after you passed away.

How will anyone know when sunset is in this place? A heavy fog rolled along the ground, it curled around her legs, trying to keep her in place. She felt the mist roll up her body to caress her face, leaving behind a cool, damp kiss on her cheek. The group pressed on in the unfathomable silence. The crunch of stone underneath their feet made Mae wince. She was afraid of disturbing the dead. She didn't know how to fight a soul. They made their way around a large boulder. She reached out her hand feeling the rough stone under her fingers. As she pulled them back, she realized that her hands were starting to freeze, her breath coming from her mouth in white puffs. Mae stared ahead of her, as far as she could see were souls. Every one of them emitted a faint yellow glow. Most of them were nude, or with varying stages of tattered and ripped clothing. Mae assumed they passed from natural causes and were buried far beneath the earth, none of their material possessions passing on with them. A few dark spots stood out in the crowd, souls who had more than likely been murdered, not offered the funeral services their bodies so rightfully deserved. Some of the souls were weeping, some were screaming. Most were sitting or

standing in an almost catatonic state. The sight made the hairs on Mae's arm stand on end. She shivered.

Isabelle led them to an alcove, seemingly unbothered by the sheer number of souls that surrounded her. It made sense though. She mentioned that she led them here.

"You will have to wait here. I've come with you as far as I can. Stay quiet and stay out of sight," she reminded them again. She moved over to Ophelia, staring down at her withered hands. She held her arms out and Ophelia fell into them.

"I am so sorry that I didn't tell you sooner, my love. I swore myself to the service of the Lady, swore that I would keep you safe. That's all I ever wanted, was for you to be safe, until you could reunite again," Isabelle finished, she held a hand out to Róisín, the small Goddess joined them in their embrace.

"And you, Goddess of Shadow, I am honored to have met you. I hope the two of you will rule one day with respect and love." Isabelle broke the hug and bowed low to Róisín, who put a small hand on her head, her pale fingers tangled with the flowers in the former Queen's strands.

"Thank you, Isabelle," she whispered. "I can never repay you for the joy you have brought back to my family." Róisín bent down and placed a kiss on the woman's head.

"Mothe... Isabelle." Ophelia struggled to find the words. Instead, she threw her arms around the woman she had called mother for centuries. "Thank you, I love you. You kept me safe for all this time when you didn't have to. When I am settled, I will come back to visit you." Mae saw a shadow pass over Isabelle's face. She braced herself against the alcove and waited for the worst.

"Oh, my love, my darling Ophelia." Isabelle looked at her. Pity marred her violet eyes. "No, at least you won't be seeing me here. I have given centuries to this Earth. I am a tired old woman. It is time I take my leave. It is time for me to join my rightful place in the Afterworld," she finished, her body failing. The life seemed to leech out of her, flowing toward the river in front of them.

"You're just going to *die*!" Ophelia yelled. "Absolutely not! I forbid it. I... I love you." She fell to her knees, clawing at Isabelle's skirt. She clenched it in her fists, refusing to let the woman walk away.

“I will see you again, my love, on a different plane of existence.” Isabelle lifted the new Goddess up and placed a kiss on her forehead. She looked at Mae with a ferocious look, as if to say she is your responsibility now, make sure no harm comes to her. Mae nodded her head once, accepting her fate. She would protect Ophelia until she was no longer needed. They watched as Isabelle moved through the souls, not disturbing any of them as she slipped past. Soon enough she had disappeared, out of sight. Ophelia wept and collapsed to the ground.

“Come on Lia, it'll be okay. She's not gone forever.” Róisín put a hand on her shoulder. Ophelia shook it off, her howls getting louder, bouncing off the rocks around them, amplifying the sound until Mae had to cover her ears to lessen the noise.

“She may as well be. I just got her back and now she's... she's... she's dead!” Ophelia grabbed Róisín's sleeve, she dragged the small Goddess to the ground beside her. Róisín patted Ophelia's head, trying to comfort her.

“She's not dead though. She's just not going to exist in this place anymore. You will see her again.” The two sisters embraced for a long moment. Ophelia's sorrow swallowed them whole, surrounding them in a depressing bubble. Mae stood off to the side of the two girls, crushing stones under her heel. She felt empty, at a complete loss as to what she could do for the girl she had just made love to not even a night ago.

“You should go over there,” Kiel said, coming to stand beside her. He kicked the ground, patting himself down trying to locate another match.

“No, she's got Ró.” Mae sighed. “She's way too good for me, anyway,” she finished under her breath. Kiel let out an exasperated sigh. Mae offered him a small, sad smile. She knew she was being ridiculous. She knew that she shouldn't assume Ophelia wouldn't want her anymore, but she couldn't stop her stomach from rolling over on itself. She wanted to be happy that Ophelia would finally have a place to belong, but she mourned for herself because she didn't deserve to be that place. Orion nudged her hair again. She reached up to stroke his soft feathers. She watched as the Goddess of Shadow embraced the girl she loved, the Goddess of Flame. They were one half of the other. Dark and light finally reunited.

It's time to push her out of your mind, focus on the task at hand. How would I ever live up to a Goddess, anyway? I'm a halfling, not even worthy of her. Doomed to wander Varanstalle for all eternity.

Time passed strangely on the banks of the Darkrael. Everything was so void of any color. Gray fog and clouds covered the whole area, blocking any light that tried to come through. It caressed her skin like a cold, dead kiss. It made her shiver as she pulled her cloak around her tights. Mae wasn't even able to tell if it was night or day anymore. There was no sun to go down. She couldn't see if the moon had risen. She felt like she had been here for days, but certainly that couldn't be true. The Keeper was scheduled to show tonight. He had not shown yet, so it must still be the same day that they left Isabelle's cottage.

Mae thought about Isabelle, the sacrifice she made for Ophelia and the Gods. A pang of respect went through her. She had never met the woman. When Ophelia and she had met, she was under the impression that Isabelle was dead. She supposed that what the woman had done was noble. She hid a Goddess right under the noses of vile kings for centuries. Mae wasn't sure if that was something she would do. She figured she was too selfish to do so. She may be ready to do anything for Ophelia and Kiel, but not for the Gods. She thought it was unwise to stay with every man who had ruled Elecara, but she imagined it would be painful to watch them descend into madness over and over again for hundreds of years. Mae could appreciate that she was exhausted, that she had seen the worst the world had to offer, and she was sick of it all. Despite her distrust of Isabelle, Mae could see that she had earned her place in the Heavens. Surly, she would have eternity now to rest, a place to spend a peaceful afterlife.

Mae wondered if souls ever remembered their mortal lives. She assumed that at the very least, some of them must. What would be the point of punishment if the crime was never remembered? Would Isabelle remember the sacrifice she made? Or would she exist in eternal bliss, unaware that the Goddess of Flame was once a part of her household? That the white-haired beauty who roamed the Afterworld was once someone she loved as a daughter. A girl she taught to read, to address a crowd, to stand tall and never back down, and not only once but many times. She hoped that Isabelle would remember something

A low *bong* sounded out across the gentle ripples of the Darkrael River, pulling Mae from her contemplation. The dim light of the bank seemed to deepen further; Mae could hardly see her own hand in front of her face. Night had finally fallen. Through the heavy fog, she saw a weak orange light floating over the water, its reflection cast beneath rippling

outward. Attached to the light was a long boat. The waterlogged wooden boards creaked eerily as it slowly cut the water. Sitting at the bow was a figure shrouded in a cloak, the dense fog curled around him. Mae assumed it was a man because she could see a long gray beard coming to a point at the figure's stomach. This must be The Keeper.

Time to get this over with. She thought. She waited with her friends, watching curiously as Róisín stared at the boat that had run itself up onto the stone shore.

"It's him," She muttered, a stunned look on her face, a longing in her eyes.

"You've met him?" Kiel asked, for once keeping his voice low.

"Of course, I have. His home is near the palace. I used to spend a lot of afternoons there with Darius. We would read on the porch of The Keeper's cottage. Did you know there are some people who believe The Keeper is actually the Cosmos itself, The Creator? Well, I call him *grand-dad*." Keil huffed, surprised. Mae was, on the other hand unperturbed by the news. She had heard the theory from Isabelle. A part of her was glad it was the truth though, Ophelia would have more family, more people to love her and help her forget Mae.

"Is that a *cat*?" Ophelia asked, staring at a very cat shaped figure sitting on The Keeper's shoulder.

"Darius!" Róisín exclaimed, clapping her hands together, a huge smile spread across her face. "Oh, Lia, you're just going to love him! I can't wait for you two to meet." Ophelia grinned at the child, caught up in her enthusiasm.

"So, how do we get onto this boat?" Mae kicked stones toward the water, watching them sink below the surface, interrupting Róisín's joy.

"Boat?" Róisín asked, confusion knitting her eyebrows together. "We don't get on the boat..."

"Then how?" Instead of answering Mae, Róisín pulled her hood up and over her hair, bringing it down low to hide her eyes. She held a finger to her bloodless lips and waved the group forward through the souls who were now starting to notice that The Keeper was coming ashore.

The boat creaked as The Keeper stepped out huffing as he set his heavy boots on the ground. He drew up to his full height and waited. Once he had stood in front of the crowd for a few minutes, he drew back his hood, revealing an angled face. It was both ancient and ageless. Mae could see

that once he was a handsome man, but now it looked like his skin was flaking off. His long gray hair hung around his shoulders, pulling his facial features down. He reminded Mae of a melted candle. She could not see his eyes, though she figured it was for the best since she was standing here with Death incarnate himself. The Keeper thumped a large scythe on the ground to help steady himself. Mae felt intimidated and awestruck all at once.

He also looks nothing like those statues at the gate. The only resemblance is the robe and the scythe. The Gods might want to find a new statue carver. She thought, not at all surprised. Not many Gods were depicted properly in art.

“Hello,” The Keeper addressed the souls, his deep baritone ricocheted off the boulders. He commanded every soul’s attention with just one word. They all turned to him at the same time, moving toward him as one being. Like a moth to flame. He held a hand up to stop them.

“Tonight, we will begin our journey. I understand that to some of you this may seem like a dream. Perhaps it is. Perhaps it is better that way, not having to ever wake again. However, you have nothing to fear, not while I am with you. For most of you, this will be paradise, for others...” He trailed off; his voice hardened. “Please follow me now, and please stay close. The river is not always what it seems.” The Keeper reached up to stroke the cat sitting on his shoulder. Mae saw him whisper something, and the creature jumped down and made his way back to the boat. The souls nearest to her shuffled, where they touched her, they dissipated. Returning to full form when she shifted. They subconsciously moved, making room for the cat as it stalked back to the boat, its tail swishing in its wake. Her eyesight faltered as the souls pressed in around her. She felt the panic rise when she couldn’t locate her friends anymore. She tried to peer through the yellow glow only to see the cat grow to the size of a human man.

Interesting, she thought, absent-mindedly reaching up to pet Orion's feathers again. *I have never seen another creature like Orion.*



Once her vision had cleared, she located her friends again. She followed along behind like a lost puppy, hoping that they weren’t a

noticeable spot of darkness in the otherwise candle-like glow. She tried to see ahead of her, but there was nothing but yellow and gray. Shapeless forms popped up beside her and just as quickly disappeared, giving her the only indication that they were actually moving. Time melded together here. Even if she owned a watch, she doubted it would work in this space. They walked along the river for an eternity, never stopping for a break. Mae watched the river as they walked, feeling her feet turn toward the banks. The river was wriggling, as if alive. Formless figures swam in the water.

Come to us. Mae heard a song in her head, wanting to join whatever was in the dark waters. A small hand clamped around hers. She tore her eyes away from Darkrael to see Róisín shaking her head. Searing pain shot through her chest, her legs ached, her calves cramping.

Mae tried to keep her mind off her aching legs, instead she pondered what lay ahead of them. This whole journey had seemed too easy so far. Sure, she had to stab a couple people but it's not like that was hard. Besides, it was all in the name of making sure Róisín was able to reunite with her parents. Were they really about to come face to face with the Lady of Darkness herself? Would they have tea? Then what? She and Kiel would return home to Elecara where they would live out the rest of their days? Kiel with some woman and her, with no one except Orion. Would she be considered the crazy aunt, as she sat there spinning tales for Kiel's children of how she once helped the Gods? Kiel and his wife pitying her when she brought another nameless woman back to her bed to fulfill the void that was opening in her heart? It wasn't the life she wanted, but she supposed it could be worse.

Mae felt the edges of time blurring together. They could have been here for minutes, hours, or days. She wasn't sure. She stumbled into Kiel's back as he came to an abrupt stop. She looked up to see The Keeper had brought the souls up to the river's edge. A few were mere inches from the water. She could hear confusion ahead of her.

"You want us to walk through Hell Water? We *can't* do that!" A loud voice boomed

"Where are we? Where is Michale?" A timid cry, closer to her than the first voice.

"I must have drunk too much. Last thing I remember was talking to that maid at the tavern."

“That bastard! He stabbed me.” The Keeper held up his hand and the souls slowly quieted.

“I do not expect you to cross the Darkrael.” Light like stars emitted from his hands. As if there was a veil at the edge of the river, Mae watched as the fog parted, revealing a bridge over the water. It looked like it was made of ice, almost translucent, brittle. If it wasn't for the disappearing starlight glinting off the very center, Mae would have thought The Keeper had lost his mind.

“A bridge? That's the way? A bridge!” Mae whispered. “If I knew it was going to be this easy, I would have just built a bridge myself.” Rolling her eyes, she looked at Ophelia and Kiel.

“It is not that simple halfling,” Róisín started, holding up a finger to silence Mae before she had a chance to make a remark. “Yes, it is a bridge, but this place is called the Bridge of Truths. You will come face to face with your innermost self here. Then and only then will you be permitted to enter the Afterworld. A mortal must know themselves inside and out, face their worst nightmare, or shed their fears before they can continue off the bridge. The Tollman controls what happens here. He will dig inside you, find the worms hiding deep in your mind and make you face them. This is where most souls realize that they have passed. It can be chaos, and sometimes it is beautiful.” As if on cue, Mae heard a gut-wrenching scream coming from the bridge. She looked over to see the soul of a man, crumpled on the ground, hands covering his ears.

“No, no, no! Lenore!” he screamed, reaching out in front of him. “I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for it to happen.” The man sobbed out.

“I shouldn't have drunk that much! Shouldn't have had that last cigarette. Oh, it burns, it burns!” Mae watched, trying to stay unattached to the sight in front of her. The man rocked back and forth. Mae could feel a burn start in her feet. She panicked. Why was this happening? Ophelia looked at her with terror in her eyes. Kiel was hopping from foot to foot.

“Don't panic,” Róisín said. “It's because you are living, you will experience some of what the souls are experiencing. It's to keep out intruders.

“I'm so sorry, Lenore. I will find him in the Afterworld. He will not be alone. Not like when the fire happened.” Mae could feel the flames as they licked up her legs. She screamed, falling to the ground. Why was she on fire? Róisín knelt beside her. Mae tried to see the Goddess through her

pain. She clamored toward her, trying to find solace in the inferno. As quickly as it began, it ended. Mae huddled on the ground, exhausted. She had just witnessed a soul pass to the other side, and she had joined him in his torture

If this is how this is going to go, I don't think I will survive. She prayed that she would not have to live anyone else's horror. She had enough Daemons of her own. She wrapped her arms around her knees, staring at the bridge as a female stepped up.

"Why am I not surprised? Yes. I am a nightgirl, I've always owned that. Some people have to do what they have to do." She stood with her hands on her hips. Mae braced herself, preparing to relive this woman's terror. The pain never came, though. Instead, she felt sorry for this woman. The streets of Elecara were hard for men, but they were almost impossible for a woman. If you didn't have someone like Fletcher to take you under their wing, if you didn't learn the tricks of the trade, picking locks and pockets to survive, then chances are you ended up as a nightgirl. The girls who slinked around after the sun had set, finding men in the taverns or on the streets to pay for a night of wild sex with them. It was no secret that nightgirls were notorious for never saying no. If there was a fantasy you wanted to fulfill, then a nightgirl was where you went. If you have a dark desire, something your lover would not participate in, then you found yourself a nightgirl.

"No! How dare you!" The female soul spun around, and back again, frantically scanning the area around her. Anger flooded out of her now.

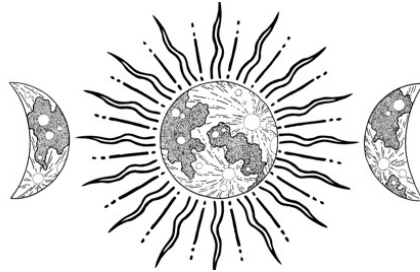
"I told you, I will not do that, you sick fuck! You can have anything you want, anything else. My body is how I make it out here and you will not cut it up with some sick fantasy of carving your name into a woman's ass while you fuck her from behind. I am not your property," she hissed. The female soul seemed to be stuck reliving the biggest secret she kept.

"No! No! Stay back!" she screamed then, "I... I... By the Lady, I was protecting myself. That sick bastard deserved to have his jewels cut off and stuffed down his oversized gullet! I'm not sorry about it and I never will be!" Mae was shocked. She knew that nightgirls had to do what they could to survive, but she never thought they would be defending themselves with knives. The female soul stood for a moment longer before she shook her head. She looked around dazed, before she slowly moved to the other side of the bridge. The air around her shimmered as she reached

the end. Mae saw her disappear on the other side, like she was never there, in the first place.

Oh no, I am not ready for this. Mae thought to herself.

The Lady of Darkness



Time was a funny thing. It sped up when one was happy, and it slowed down when things were sad. It made a person live in the moment, however fleeting that may be. She had no way to mark the passage of time, no way of knowing how long she had been sitting on this hard-wood floor. She did not remember how long ago she had learned of Lucien's return. Balo had been uncharacteristically absent: he hadn't even bothered to come and gloat, to taunt her about the boy prince's return. She hoped he had kept his word, and now that Lucien was back with him, he had let Róisín go.

She could hear voices outside of her tower prison, the downfall of her new quarters. It was no longer quiet, like the dungeons. The voices were muffled but sounded decidedly female. Turning her head, she pulled her chains taut, straining closer to the door. She listened; the voices floated through the door now with surprising clarity.

"Did you hear?" one asked

"Yes! Isn't it exciting?" the other answered. They both sounded young, female, and very full of arrogance.

"What do you think you're going to wear?"

Wear? She thought. *To what?*

"I was thinking about that gold gown. You know the one that ends here in the front, the one with no back. I really want to impress Garrett."

"Oh my, he certainly is handsome."

"Handsome, and hopefully good with his hands."

"By the Lady! Lydia, you are a harlot."

By the Lady, ironic child that you use my name in vain. I'm chained on the other side of this door. Now, ladies, can we please get on with it.

“Excuse me. I am a woman of needs. And he will *fill* every need I have.”

“Lydia!”

“Oh, fine. I can’t wait to dance, and stuff my face full of... chocolate. Stop looking at me like that! Come on. I think you would look stunning in that violet number of yours. Maybe you can get your needs filled, too.”

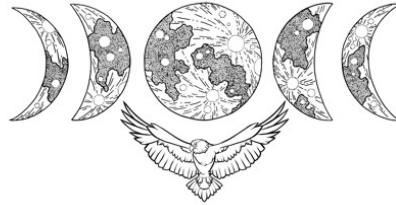
“Ha. Ha. Can you believe it, though? Lucien returned? I wonder how... maybe the Lady took mercy on him. If anyone would earn a pardon from the Lady herself, it would be that little cutie. Either way, we finally get a party! *A masquerade ball!*”

Mercy! I would never. You don’t even know what he did! Even if I wanted to, I am bound by the laws of the realm. Once you are dead, you stay dead. At least... that's how it has been for millennia now.

The girls on the other side of the door squealed and giggled as they moved down the hallway, toward where she assumed the stairs would be. She was no longer able to hear them. The Lady sat back against the stone once again.

A Ball? Maybe this will be my chance to escape.

Chapter Thirteen



Mae chewed on her nails as she watched souls cross the bridge. She watched innocent people break down, shedding their fears before moving to the next existence. She watched criminals defend what they had done in their mortal life, choosing to have the Lady judge their crimes. As every soul passed and she moved closer to the bridge, she worried about what she was about to face. She had so many Daemons that she was sure the Tollman would have his choice of which he would use to torment her. The temperature continued to drop as they made their way slowly across the bank of Darkrael. The silence was a vacuum, pounding against her eardrums as it threatened that she would never hear again.

Butterflies made a home in her stomach, causing her muscles to tighten with anxiety. Was it this place that was causing this feeling? It was desolate, cold and silent. Surely, it would cause most beings to be nervous. Her boots met the edge of the bridge. Not ready to face her innermost self just yet, she moved aside. Kiel's hand clamped down on her shoulder. He gave her a weary smile as he took her place. He took a step, his black boot stopping in midair before coming down hard. Mae winced waiting for the crack of the bridge falling apart but it didn't come. Kiel ran his hands through his pale blonde waves. His eyes hardened.

"Boy, I could go for a smoke right now." He chuckled, his laugh falling flat. He took one slow step after another. "Hmm... maybe this isn't so bad. Maybe I've got no deep dark secrets to... oh." Mae watched his face fall, turning him from the fun-loving man she called a brother. to a dark, vexed

man with something to hide. His deep brown eyes darkened further until they were almost black, like a midnight sky with no moon.

“No. Not that one, please not her. I was only five! I'm sorry. I'm sorry mama. I tried. She fell. I couldn't save her!” Mae watched tears gather in Kiel's eyes. Slowly they dripped off his eyelashes to the ground. He sank to his knees, balling his fists at his sides. “I tried to save her. I did. I couldn't reach her. The river took her under too fast. Sophia! My little Sophia. I miss you every day. Mum, father, I can never be forgiven for what I did. I couldn't save her. I know you've never forgiven me for her drowning.” Kiel's sobs felt like a punch to Mae's stomach. She doubled over in pain; her arms wrapped tightly around her middle as she tried to keep her breakfast down. Kiel reached toward something that Mae could not see. One thought wiggled its way to the front of her mind.

Who was Sophia?

“I'm so sorry baby girl. I'm so sorry. I couldn't do anything; you were gone before I even saw you. I think about you every day. I think about the beautiful woman you would have become, the babies you would have had. How I would have spoiled those little brats, because my nieces would deserve the world. I love you. I love you so much.” It felt like hours because Kiel's wailing started to subside. Soft whimpers left his throat, a strangled, depressing sound. He took a deep, shuddering breath before rising to his feet. He blew a kiss to the sky above.

“I will find you one day, Sophia, and I will become worthy of you.” He pushed his shoulders back, looking lighter and older for what he had faced. With an air of nonchalance, he made his way across the rest of the bridge. The air around him shimmered as he stepped off the other side, disappearing beyond Mae's sight.

Mae wondered what had happened to Kiel. He had kept it from both her and Ophelia for ten years, carrying a silent burden on his shoulders. A pang of hurt went through her chest. She didn't think they kept secrets like that from each other. He had another sister. One who drowned? He had said he was only five when it happened. Despair washed over her; her parents may not have had time for her, but the six younger boys always looked up to her. They were her only blood family. She couldn't even begin to imagine what it would be like if something she did caused one of them to die. She would never be able to forgive herself. She wished Kiel would have told them so that they could all deal with his hardship together, but

she knew she would have held onto her dark past if the roles were reversed. She understood Kiel a little more now. His carefree attitude and sarcasm veiled a dark secret. He kept everyone on the surface, never letting anyone get too deep.

Mae wasn't sure if what Kiel said about his mother and father was true. She always knew them to be very loving and accepting of their oldest son. Perhaps, though, behind closed doors things were not what they seemed. She wanted to talk to Kiel, let him know he wasn't alone, that he didn't have to bear the burden of Sophia by himself anymore. They were family.

She heard a sniffle beside her. Ophelia was quietly crying. Crystal tears slid down her face. With one flame colored hand, she wiped her nose.

"Lia... what is it?" Mae gasped. She took a hold of Ophelia's arm, bringing her in for a hug. She smoothed her white hair back from her face and looked into her sunrise eyes.

"I... I... I just wish he would have told us. We could have helped take some of the hurt away," Ophelia whined, pushing back from Mae.

"I know Lia, but he chose not. I'm sure he had his reasons."

"We're family Mae! More than anything else, we should be able to talk to each other! He chose to not tell us about a huge thing that happened in his life. Why? Are we not good enough?" Ophelia swiped at her eyes again and stomped her foot on the ground. She stared daggers at Mae. Taken aback by the sudden anger flowing out of the new Goddess, Mae took her hand again.

"Lia, of course we're enough." *You're enough.* "But sometimes people choose to keep their daemons to themselves. I'm sure that you have not told Kiel and I everything that has happened in your life." Ophelia nodded, accepting Mae's answer. She twisted her cloak around her hand and filled her lungs. Ophelia stepped onto the bridge; a faint glow surrounded her.

"See you on the other side. I love you." Ophelia blew a kiss. Mae just nodded her head, assuming Ophelia meant as family. Not a lover. Not anymore. The beautiful Goddess she had become would need someone worthy of her. She was sure that Ophelia could see that, but was trying to be polite.

As with Kiel, Ophelia stood for a moment. She was stoic, her face unwavering. She was the most beautiful creature Mae had ever seen. Her opalescent white hair braided out of her face, her sunrise eyes full of sadness and hope all at the same time. Moment after moment passed.

Ophelia stood like a statue, waiting. After a while, she simply shrugged her shoulders and stepped toward the other side of the bridge. As her foot toed the edge of the other side, Mae saw Ophelia cock her head to the side. She smiled brightly and shook her head. A small laugh bubbled up out of her throat. She walked off into the shimmering air.

“What in the fuck?” Mae asked, not to anyone in particular.

“I don’t know.” Róisín said, confusion etched into her tiny cherub face. “I’ve never seen anything like it. No one has ever just... walked off The Bridge of Truth. Never.” She sounded afraid; Mae was surprised that Gods were afraid of anything. “The bridge makes you face yourself, your fears, your Daemons. No one is so pure that they just leave unscathed.” Róisín tugged on Mae’s cloak. Mae put a hand on the child’s head. She patted her trying to comfort the girl, but she was afraid for herself.

“Well, maybe the bridge knew who Ophelia was. She is a Goddess, after all.” Róisín wasn’t listening though. She chewed her nails disbelief was written on her face.

“Róisín?” Mae questioned, tapping her on the shoulder. Róisín didn’t reply. She just nodded her head once before pushing Mae forward to start her own trek across the bridge.

“Are you ready?” Róisín looked up at Mae, concern filling her face.

“Not at all. I’ve done a lot of things in my twenty-three years, Little Rose,” Mae replied, dropping a hand to Róisín’s shoulder. Mae ran her hands through her curls, fluffing it to distract herself from what was coming next. She drew in a breath, holding it in her chest until she ached. She let her chest deflate agonizingly slow before setting a heavy boot on to the ice-like bridge. Everything around her disappeared. She tried to peer through the black, but she couldn’t see the yellow glow of the souls. She couldn’t see Róisín, she couldn’t even locate the bridge beneath her feet anymore. She waited, tapping her boot impatiently, crossing and uncrossing her arms. She knew that there was no moving from this spot until she faced whatever the Tollman was going to throw at her.

“*Maeva*,” a gravelly voice whispered into her head. It felt like stones rattling around in her brain. It made her itch. “*Maeva of Elecara, it is time for you to face your daemons.*”

“Daemons? Which one? I’ve got so many,” she said flatly, squinting to try and locate the voice.

“I know much about you Maeva of Elecara. I know that you were never loved, carried by your mother for nine months. Neither of you have a relationship with one another. I know that your mortal father would have preferred to drown you as an infant. I know that you think your Daemon father tricked her, but he did not. She wanted him. She may have regretted it after, but she enjoyed it at the time. I know she loved him. I know she abandoned you, for every time she looked at you, she remembered how good it felt, how real love felt.”

“Leave my mother out of this. I came to terms a long time ago that she regrets giving birth to me, regrets not listening to my father, and throwing my tiny infant body into the Hell Water when she had a chance. If that's the best you've got, then I'll just be on my way.” Mae made to move on to the other side, when the voice boomed in her mind again. She pressed her hands to her ears, trying to quell the headache that was starting behind her eyes.

No! There are many things you must face. I know the way you tried to cope with your abandonment. I know of the women you brought back to your bed because they whispered a promise in your ear and put a drink in your hand. How you would try to fuck your way into feeling something even remotely close to love. I know how you felt those nights lying on the cottage floor beaten, bruised, left gasping for air. I know that you cannot open your heart fully.

“Alright...” she started cautiously. “You've got me there. I dealt with a lot of my feelings in bad ways. I was young, and I was really, really stupid. However, a beautiful girl is a beautiful girl. Do I regret the one-night stands? Maybe a little... but I needed to feel something. As for *her*, I will always regret that. I will never be able to fully let that go, and I have accepted that. So... are we done here?” She tried to act more confident than she felt, but she was starting to feel the nerves rise up, tingling across her skin like electric pulses.

NO. Maeva of Elecara. If you are so determined to ignore what is outside, then you must find it within yourself. What is holding you back?

“Holding me back? What kind of question is this? Everything is holding me back!” Mae shouted at the voice whispering around her. “In case you haven't noticed, which would be hard since you seem to know everything about me, mister disembodied voice, since you clearly think you know anything about my mother. I am a cambion, a *halfling*,” she

sneered. “Doomed to wander for eternity in a Gods forsaken forest, riding something that stinks of rotting flesh! Literally, everything I step on is going to turn to ash. Death is going to follow my every movement. Everything is holding me back! I don't *want* that life, but my only way out is appeasing a Goddess who is not exactly known for forgiveness. The girl I love is that Goddess’ daughter. Her daughter! She’s a fucking Goddess herself, for crying out loud. How am I ever supposed to live up to that? How am I ever supposed to be worthy of her?” Tears poured out of Mae’s eyes; she couldn’t comprehend how so much liquid could come out of someone. She wiped them away, scratching at herself, but the tears wouldn’t stop. “You want me to face the truth? I *love* her, and I will *never* be enough for her! Never! But by the Three Eyes of the fucking Lady, I want to be! I want to hold her, cherish her, and wake up to her every day! I want her to be my everything. I want to *love* without fear. I want to make love without regret. I would do anything for Ophelia. I want to be everything for Ophelia,” she finished her chest heaving, tears flowed freely down her face, darkening the front of her shirt, staining it with her despair. She looked around her. She still couldn’t leave the spot where she stood now.

“Why can't I leave? Do you just enjoy my suffering?” She sobbed. The world around her darkened further. She couldn't see her hand in front of her face. A scuffling sound reached her ears. It sounded like someone, or something was fighting to come over to her.

“*Maeva?*” A voice, different and similar to the first, softer but still held an air of authority filled the silence around her. “*Maeva, child, I am so sorry for everything you have been through. You did not deserve this life; you do not deserve the future being thrust upon you. You deserve happiness. I will pray to the Lady and the Prince you are able to find it. You may go now.*”

“Who are you?” Mae asked, peering through the gloom around her. She could make out a formless shape in front of her, but couldn’t see any details.

“*Someone who regrets what you have been put through. I am sorry, Maeva. I never wanted you to be unhappy. You should not have been abandoned. Fletcher should not have had to take on the burden of raising you. It should have been someone else. I also should not have abandoned you. I am so impressed with the young lady you have become; you are*

beautiful. I want you to know that I thought about you every day. I loved your mother..."

"Pardon?" Mae squeaked, as a figure stepped out of the gloom. It was tall, far too tall to be considered human. Horns protruded from its skull spiraling up into the air, adding to its already impressive height. Leaf green snake-like eyes, bright as lanterns in the dark, stared at her, unblinking. The figure crossed its arms over its chest. They reminded Mae of tree trunks, bigger than her head and able to crush anyone who had an issue with the creature in front of her. Her eyes traveled down the creature's body to its cloven feet. They clacked along the bridge as the figure made its way closer and closer. She could feel the air temperature drop significantly as it came near. Her breath was stolen from her chest.

"Who are you?" she choked out, finding it very hard to breathe.

"I am nobody important, now. I serve the Lady and the Prince," the creature spoke, still in her mind. She was desperate for it to leave; she wanted the silence of her own brain back.

"Okay..." she said, rolling her eyes so hard she almost saw her brain. "Then who were you?"

"I think you already know the answer to that, Maeva."

"So, you are my father?" Shock. She hadn't even made it to the Afterworld yet and here was her father. Or at least, here was a Daemon claiming to be her father. She was having trouble processing the information she was given. The creature spoke again, its voice bouncing around her skull.

"That is correct."

"How? Why? How do I know you're telling me the truth?" Exasperation filled her voice; she didn't know what to believe.

"I suppose faith. Maeva, I am a Daemon, but I am no liar. I did. I do love your mother, and I fully believe that she loved me once. I am sorry she abandoned you, you did not deserve that," the voice in her head quieted. She felt the apologies, all the unsaid things, just at the edge of her consciousness.

"If I believe you, and I'm not saying I do. You cursed me! You! You're the reason I'm going to end up in Varanstalle, wandering as death for all eternity! If it wasn't for you, I could have walked out of that place unmarked! I should have been killed as an infant. It would be better than that. You're the reason I felt alright, felt *good*, when I killed those soldiers!

You. I hate you!" she screamed, spit flying from her mouth and landing on the Daemon. It lifted a large hand and wiped away the drops that hit his chest. It sighed.

"I expect nothing less. I truly am sorry, and I hope you can find it within yourself one day to forgive me."

"Forgive you? You're joking right, *dad*? My entire life has been a joke. My afterlife will be even more of one." She stomped her foot on the ground, feeling like a child but unable to stop herself.

"Maeva, you know you can avoid your fate. Stay true to your heart. Stay on the path before you. You love her, show her. She needs you more than you think." The Daemon's voice was a quiet whisper in her head.

"How! How do I be good enough for her? She's a Goddess! I'm a fucking *half breed* and abomination."

"You said it yourself, you want to. Take what you want, Maeva, change your fate."

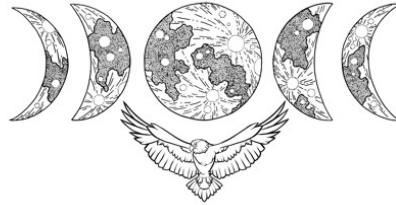
Before Mae could say another word, the world around her brightened - if only slightly- she looked around her. Where was that Daemon who claimed to be her father? Was that even real? Was she already losing her mind, taking a one-way ticket to Varanstalle? What if the creature was telling the truth, though? Her father? Could it be... Her mind was spinning with the possibility of meeting half of her heritage. The air around her shimmered.

A portal. She thought.

It felt like water and air caressing her body, letting her drift to the other side. She stumbled out and fell straight on her face. Orion jumped from her shoulder at the last minute, squawking annoyance the whole time. She looked up from the ground. The grass below her was soft, cushioning her fall. Around her, everything was hued in gold. Like a late summer afternoon. Warmth settled into her bones, her legs and arms feeling spongy after coming through the portal. A soft breeze blew across her face, causing her curls to bounce slightly. In front of her, she saw feet. She let her eyes wander further and further up until she was met with the most beautiful sunrise she had ever seen.

Ophelia.

Chapter Fourteen



Róisín stepped into view right behind Mae. Gracefully, she set her feet on the ground.

“How did you get here so fast? We were waiting here for hours before Mae came through!” Kiel asked.

“Oh... I stayed out of sight. I just kind of followed Mae.” She replied. She cast a glance at Mae, who looked up at the child Goddess from her place on the ground. Mae watched as a look of pity crossed Róisín's face, her eyebrows knit together, her bi-colored eyes full of sadness.

“I don't need your pity, child. I'm fine.” Mae pulled herself up into a crouch.

“If you say so, thief.” Róisín said flatly, offering her small hand. Mae sighed and took it. She struggled to get up off the ground. She brushed her pants off, blowing hair out of her face and looked around herself.

“Where are we anyway?” She saw a sparkling cove ahead of her, the deep sapphire water glistening in the golden light around them. Small, white-tipped waves made their way to the shore. Rocks sat along the edge of the water, looking like a very uncomfortable place to sit and contemplate.

“It's like a perpetual sunset...” Ophelia said in awe. “It's beautiful.”

“Is that a fucking two headed unicorn?” Kiel exclaimed, tearing everyone's eyes away from the scene in front of them. “Now, I've seen everything. Unicorns aren't even supposed to be real and here I am, staring at one with *two heads*.”

“*That* is a pegasys. It's not really a unicorn, and it's not really a Pegasus in the traditional sense.” Róisín said. “And her name is Eluna, *and* you will be respectful.” Upon hearing her name, the pegasys raised her heads. She whinnied and trotted over to Róisín, snuffling affection and nuzzling into her red hair. The child Goddess stroked the pegasys' ash blue mane.

“I have missed you,” she whispered. Mae watched as Kiel slowly made his way over to the creature with an outstretched hand. He grazed his fingertips along the creature's silver body. Eluna sniffed at his palm, snorting as she spread her scaled wings, turning the golden light to a moon silver where it hit the scales. She pounded at the ground, pushing her nose into Kiel's hand.

“Boy, you make friends well, don't you?” Mae asked.

“My charm worked on you, didn't it?” Kiel laughed nervously; hand still placed on the pegasys' body. She was large, Kiel's tall frame only reaching to the base of her necks. Róisín let out a huffy breath, almost stomping her foot in a comical attempt to have everyone listen to her. She turned to the cove as soon as she knew everyone was paying attention, dramatically waving her hand about, she said.

“This is Nyneve Cove.” The small body of water was nestled between two sloping green hills. The sparkling sapphire water was still, except for where the waterfall met the glass-like surface. The narrow end of the cove was a cacophony of color, large flowers, the size of a man's head that Mae had no name for lined the banks, reaching toward the water as if looking for a drink. A sequoia tree towered above them, sitting against one of the hills, its roots racing to the water and its branches clawing for the sky above.

“Nyneve?” Mae said, aghast. “The Siren Queen of the six water realms, Nyneve?” She hadn't heard much about Nyneve recently, but she was known to be the most brutal ruler of all the mortal realms. She protected her territory viciously. If one dare to try and hurt one of the merfolk, they would find themselves skewered on their own harpoons, becoming a bloody reminder of what she was capable of.

Nyneve was believed to be a beautiful creature herself once. It was said her skin was the color of a deep cornflower. Her long blonde hair swept around her, cascading like spun gold down to her knees. She always kept it artfully braided for she was a warrior. Her eyes were once a deep

midnight blue, flecked with gold, like tiny constellations. No one remembered how Nyneve came to rule the seven water realms, but it is said she had done so for centuries. Now, she had become one with the sea flora in which she made her home. Her once lustrous hair now a swamp green, took on a seaweed like appearance. Parts of fishers' nets, fishbones and coral stuck throughout, as if her hair had ensnared these trinkets on its own. Her skin, no longer a beautiful indigo, but a washed out dull blue gray. Her fingertips and toes were puckered and wrinkled; her hands gnarled. She was blind from existing in the salt waters for so long, her milky eyes were endless and all knowing. To gaze upon her would be an untimely demise. It is said she could stare into your soul and use her siren voice to make you do her bidding. No one dared to try to challenge her anymore, choosing to stay away from the realms beneath the waves.

"Correct. The Afterworld serves all the realms. When merfolk pass, they too are judged by mama and papa. If they have lived a peaceful and good life, they end up here." As Róisín said this, Mae saw a deep blue tail flick through the water, droplets reflected in the golden light, a shower of liquid gold washed over the rocks on the bank. She wondered what it would be like to be a mermaid, to be free to explore the water, to always be floating. Ultimately, she decided it wouldn't be a life she wanted to live; she had never been fond of swimming.

"Where have the souls gone?" Ophelia asked. Mae noticed then that nothing had followed her other than Róisín.

"They are taken directly to the hall of judgment where they meet mama and papa," Róisín said, shielding her eyes.

"So, why are we here?" Mae asked, suspicion crawling into her voice.

"I really don't know how the bridge works yet. I haven't got that far in my studies. I assume though it is because we are living beings, or maybe it recognized that two of us were Goddesses," Róisín replied, uneasiness crawling into her voice. Perhaps she had left the realm before and didn't want to divulge more information. Mae was about to ask when she was interrupted.

"Convenient, I am starving. Is there somewhere to eat around here?" Kiel asked, rubbing at his stomach. Mae and Ophelia laughed out loud. Momentarily forgetting that they were in the Afterworld, the place where no one was living anymore. Orion chirped in agreement.

“Always you and the food. You silly beast,” Mae said, smiling at the bird. He hopped around in a circle, bobbing his head up and down.

“Yes, there is the market. We can stop for cakes. I know, why do souls need food when they're dead? Well, that's simple. They don't. But if they're here, then they're meant to have a happy Afterlife. Cakes make people happy.” Róisín smiled and waved her arm. The group followed wandering around the Afterworld like tourists.

They walked out of Nyneve Cove and started down a winding dirt path. Traveling further downhill toward a small cluster of buildings. After walking for a while, the dirt turned to cobblestone beneath their feet, Mae's boots clacking against them, the stones doing nothing to comfort her aching feet. The buildings popped up around them, quaint shops, all painted different colors. Reds and purples coexisting beside greens and oranges. The whole place was a cacophony of color. The shops had cute names like "Sweet Pea's Sweet Tea" and "Silverstar Cafe". It seemed that they had entered a bakery market. The smells of cakes drifting on a light breeze that had picked up. It was heavenly as the scents mixed together: vanilla, chocolate, cinnamon and fruit wafted around Mae; her mouth started to water. Her stomach grumbled loudly, agreeing with Kiel about starving.

They approached a small shop, it was painted a deep purple, flecked with white that reminded Mae of the night sky. Small blue flowers, potted in red clay, sat outside the door, swaying gently as if to wave them inside. A large picture window showed the inside, a full display of cakes, cookies, brownies and other baked goods waited for them. Each one intricately decorated, waiting to be savored. Wrought-iron tables and matching chairs dotted the inside of the shop, enough for room for one mortal, two Goddesses, one half Daemon and a small bird to sit at. They opened the door, Mae glancing at the sign that hung above the door, *Mother Moon Bakery*.

Róisín ushered them all around a table before skipping off to the counter. She waved to the souls who were crowding around a display of moon shaped caked. The three friends look at each other warily.

“We're almost done with our quest,” Kiel finally said after a few moments.

“Quest?” Mae asked, giggling.

“Correct! Quest!” Kiel said dramatically, waving his arms about. “Soon, we’ll have you two home and then Mae and I will wander back to Elecara to live out our days.”

“That’s...” Ophelia sighed, twisting a napkin in her hands. “Not what I want. You two are the most important people in my life. We will find some way to stay together. We have to.” Mae stared at the wall; she didn’t feel like talking about what she was going to do after this. Fortunately for her, Róisín returned then with small cakes for everyone. Decorated with beautiful white waves of icing and tiny pink and red roses.

“Hey look! The Little Rose is going to eat a little rose!” Kiel laughed, popping a whole cake in his mouth. He groaned. “This is delicious. When I die, I’m taking up a spot at this table forever.” He closed his eyes and continued chewing. Mae tried to smile while she picked at the little cake sitting in front of her. Instead, her thoughts turned to what happened on the bridge.

Was that really my father? She thought to herself. I don't see a reason why it would lie, although I'll be the first to admit I really don't know much about Daemons. Drawing in a deep breath she licked a bit of icing off her finger, savoring the sweetness as it spread across her tongue, butterscotch vanilla, her favorite. I wonder what it, he, meant when he said he was pretty sure that my mother loved him once. She has always made it well known that she never wanted me thrust upon her. Never wanted to be lured in by a Daemon. She made it clear to me that she could never love me because of what I came from. The child of an abomination. What if he was telling the truth, though? What if she did love him in some way and that's why she could never look at me, because I reminded her of him. I think I could live with that; it would be better than thinking she never loved me at all.

I wonder if I could forgive him... he cursed me, made me what I am. Made it so no person would ever look at me as more than a monster. Everyone except her, of course. But it is his blood running through my veins. He is the reason I got a thrill from killing those men. He's the reason I will probably end up in Varanstalle, the reason I could never be good enough for a Goddess. I wish I could be though.

No, I don't think I can forgive him, not now... maybe not ever. She thought again about the first woman she ever loved. She really was beautiful. Hard, muscles rippled along her arms. In the beginning, this

made Mae feel secure when she held her. Those arms would turn on her though, hands would meet her face, leaving behind deep purple bruises. Words would crawl their way into her brain.

"You are a worthless whore."

"You don't deserve love."

"Why would I ever love you?"

"You should probably just disappear."

"I would kill you myself if it was worth my time."

"Stupid slut. Nightgirls are better than you."

She could feel tears running down her cheeks. Softly they landed on the top of her cake. *Plip, plip, plip*. Ophelia looked at her through hooded eyelids.

"Maeva," she said quietly, putting a hand on her forearm. "Are you alright?" Mae looked at Ophelia then, her eyes full of concern, genuine concern, for her. Her pink lips pouted, her soft hands sending sparks down Mae's skin.

"It's nothing..."

"You're a terrible liar, you know that, right? You can talk to me Mae, I love you. I am here for you," Ophelia pleaded, gripping Mae's arm.

"I don't really want to get into it right now, Ophelia," Mae answered flatly. Ophelia pulled her hand away, looking wounded. Mae felt awful.

You're not good enough for her. The voice in her head said again



They finished up their cakes in silence. A somber mood fell over the table. Mae picked pieces off her treat and handed it to Orion. The eagle pecked at her hands, eating the sweet cake as quickly as he could.

"I think we should get moving," Róisín said after the cakes were long gone. "We've got a long way to go to get to the palace." As they stood up from the table, Ophelia grabbed Mae's hand. She looked down at their entwined fingers, her heart breaking a little more. Her other hand was snatched up at that moment. She followed the arm up and met Kiel's soft brown expression.

"We're family, Mae," he said, in a rare serious tone.

"Always and forever," Ophelia whispered from her other side. Tears fell freely from her eyes. She buried her face into Kiel's shoulder, hands

came up to stroke her hair.

When did I become so emotional?

“Thank you,” she said out loud. The three of them made their way to the door, the bell overhead jingling as they walked outside to meet Róisín. A loud screech sounded behind them. Orion puffing up to half his full size, pecking angrily at the door to the bakery.

“By the Lady! Orion! I’m sorry,” Mae said, pushing the door open to let him out.

“Forgot he didn’t have hands?” Kiel asked. Orion shot him a glare, pecking at his feet. “Woah, down birdy.”

“Orion, cut it out. I’m sorry. Now, can we please get going? We may not be in danger anymore, but we still have to keep moving.”

They continued on, not having much to say to each other. Mae listened to the crunch under her boots. Around her, the golden light glinted off of green hills. Mae could see that this would be a place for rest. It was peaceful. They passed through a small area of willow trees, their long leaves brushed along Mae’s skin, the smell of fresh trees filling her senses. She felt calmer the closer they walked to the palace.

“Mae, can I ask you something?” Róisín asked after a long stretch of walking. Her voice loud in the peaceful quiet.

“Uh, sure, but I don’t promise to answer.”

“Can you tell me about you and Orion?”

Mae recounted the story of how the two of them met that day on the roof.

“Orion refused to leave my side then. It felt almost like in his death Fletcher sent him to watch over me. A guardian, perhaps. He seems to know my moods, sometimes before even I do. After Fletcher’s death, Orion and I would fly up to the cliffs, watch the stars as they skated across the sky.” She ruffled Orion’s feathers affectionately. “I’ll always have you, won’t I?” She cooed, Orion chirped back to her, gently pecking at her cheeks, enough for her to feel it but not enough to draw blood. “Yes, yes, I love you too you silly beast.” She laughed. It felt like the first time she had laughed in a long time.

“Where did you meet Fletcher?” Róisín asked.

“Where are all the questions coming from, little Ró?” Mae asked in return, choosing to not answer the question.

“I am simply curious.”

“Well, if you must know, you are aware my parents mostly left me to my own devices as a child. I took to pick-pocketing for the sheer thrill of it. I saw an older man one day, a golden watch chain hanging out of one of his pockets. I can be pretty silent on my feet when I want to be, so I crept up to him. I had one finger hooked through the chain when a withered hand grabbed mine.

‘Can I help you young lady?’ The man stared down at me, one blind eye burning into my chest.

‘Oh no... I thought... I wanted... I’ I stumbled over my words, trying to find a plausible excuse for why my hands were inches from this man’s back pocket.

‘Oh child, enough. I have been watching you hone your craft for months now. Follow me.’

I could feel my breath catch in my lungs, but I figured I really had nothing else to lose, so I followed him. We wound through the back streets of Elecara. The stench of day-old alcohol and sex assaulted my senses. He led me to a small home on the outer part of the downtown area. He brought me inside. Taking off his overcoat, he turned to me.

‘Well child, since your parents are clearly not teaching you anything, it is time you learn something. Welcome to your new home.’

The rest is pretty much history. I spent every day with Fletcher after that. He passed away when I was ten. The same day I met Orion.” Mae had thought about that day so many times she didn’t even feel the pull of sadness in her chest anymore.

“I’m sorry, Mae, truly I am. Maybe we can find him here,” Róisín said, hope filled her voice.

“I don’t think so, Ró, he wasn’t an innocent man. He may have owned what he was, but he wouldn’t be spared. I know he wouldn’t.” Róisín sighed at Mae’s answer but didn’t reply.

Mae caught Ophelia looking at her. She wanted so much to go over to her, link their fingers. Draw her into her chest, kiss her. Love her. She didn’t know how she could move on after all of this without her. She will have to stay here though.

And I don't think a mortal, even a halfling like me, would be able to stay here. Not unless... Mae quickly banished the thought from her head. She didn’t even see how that could work. She assumed that if she took her

own life, it would be a one-way ticket to Varanstalle. In fact, they would probably make her the Reaper Rider queen or some morbid shit.

As it did at the River Darkrael, time here seemed to move differently. The golden afternoon light only shifted subtly, Mae could only guess by the ache in her toes that they had been walking for hours.

One thing is for sure, when this is all over, I am just going to sit. No walking. Just sitting,

Cresting over the next hill, Mae looked up to see a beautiful palace. It looked as though it sat upon the clouds.

"It's fog," Róisín said, as if reading her thoughts.

As they walked a little closer, Mae saw that the palace did in fact sit on top of a cliff, the fog so thick around its base churned pastel pinks and blues melding with the silver gray mist. The palace reached toward the sky. Obsidian and gold towers jutted up clawing their way toward the sky. A gilded gate, black, shined to a golden sheen cut off their path. Guard towers sat on each side, manned and armed ready to protect the Gods. Lush green gardens seemed to sprout up into sight from the fog before disappearing again as it shifted.

"Opulent," Mae said.

"You have everything!" Kiel exclaimed.

An elegant waterfall fell over the edge of the cliff, spraying a mist up as it hit the jagged rocks at the bottom. Mae felt the drops hitting her face, icy cold fingers clawed down her back. She shivered.

"Is the water here Hell Water as well?" Ophelia asked.

"Yes, it surrounds the palace. It is the second last line of defense. We do have our own battalion, our own guards. Most of the time the Hell Water is enough to deter anyone from trying to harm the Gods." Kiel jumped back, not wanting to get touched by the water.

"How do we get from here to there, fly? I'm apparently the only one who will die if we try to swim." Kiel asked, laughing at his own joke.

"Actually, yes," Róisín said. She put two fingers in her mouth and let out a long piercing whistle. Kiel clamped his hands on his ears, glaring at the small Goddess.

"Ouch," he exclaimed, Róisín gave him an apologetic look and shrugged. Eluna trotted up to her, where she came from, Mae had no idea.

"Eluna will take us up. I will ride with Ophelia, then I will come back down for you Kiel." Róisín snickered as Kiel's face paled. "If you don't

mind Mae, I'll come for you last."

"I can just go with Orion," Mae said, the eagle already puffing up to full size, spreading his wings, ruffling them excitedly.

"I don't see why that would be an issue. Alright, you can follow me when I come for Kiel. Mae nodded as she sat down on the soft green grass. She patted the spot beside her inviting Kiel to join her. Together they watched as Ophelia tried to get on Eluna's back, Róisín had to help her. She settled between the pegasys' necks and wings. Her knuckles were white from gripping the creature's mane. Afterward the child Goddess jumped up behind her sister. She clucked her tongue sharply and Eluna took off into the air, Ophelia screaming in terror the whole way up. Once they were out of earshot, Kiel turned on Mae, the look in his eyes telling her he was disappointed.

"Are you ever going to stop brooding and *talk* to her?" he accused, stabbing a finger into her arm.

"Why Kiel? Can I not just brood in peace?" She winced, rubbing her arm.

"Listen Mae, you may think that because she's a Goddess she's going to just forget that she loves you, but I stumbled in on you two that morning. She was wrapped up in you. She didn't want to let you go. I doubt there's much that will change that."

"I'll think about it, Kiel, but I'm not holding out any hope." Kiel scoffed and watched as Róisín led Eluna back down to them. He stood up and stalked over to the creature. He squealed when one of her heads opened its mouth to lick his hair, waving his hand in front of her face to get her to stop. He succeeded in only making her lick him again. He scowled as he felt his hair, flicking his hands down to rid himself of saliva. Kiel had little trouble climbing onto Eluna's back; he let out another yelp as they spiraled into the air. Mae waved Orion over to her, settling into the spot between his wings. She buried her face in his soft black plumage. He smelled like the forest, wild and free. She stroked his feathers and whispered.

"Ready to fly?" Orion let out a fierce cry as he took off from the ground. It was all Mae could do to hold on as he shot higher up the side of the rocky cliff. Mae watched as the Afterworld spread out below her. Rolling hills led to small, connected rivers, round ponds opened up along the river every so often, providing a little oasis for souls to find a moment

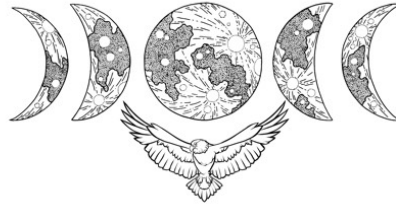
of solitude. She turned to watch their ascent. It didn't take very long to get to the top of the cliff, the eagle overshot the top by a bit, but continued to swoop upward enjoying the moment of freedom. He called out sharply. Mae could feel the pure glee flowing through him. After a few more dips and spins, he dived back down, softly landing at the gate. He shrunk down under Mae, until he was small enough that she ended up falling on her behind.

“Oh, you're so funny Ri,” she said, a genuine smile on her face, as he hopped back up onto her shoulder. A groaning noise demanded her attention; Mae, Ophelia and Kiel turned to see the gates opening slowly. A figure stood behind them, silhouetted by the soft light. He, Mae thought the figure looked male, radiated bright beams like the sun. Mae squinted against the garish light.

“Who is...” Mae started, cut off by Róisín shouting as she took off, running toward him.

“Papa!”

Chapter Fifteen



The God of Light, Prince of the Sun. The Lady's lover, Róisín's father.

Ophelia's father as well. Mae reminded herself. He was everything Mae thought a God would be. His massive height towered over them. He was sharp angles and gold. Gold brushed bronze skin, wheat blonde hair that tickled his collarbones, tied back in a series of elaborate braids. His eyes mirrored Ophelia's, but darker. A sunset where she was a sunrise. He was regal, he was made to make you feel safe. Mae was awestruck and intimidated. Sure, she had been traveling with two Goddesses herself for the past few days, but this God, this being an ancient. He had existed longer than even her great great grandparents had been but a thought. She watched as the tiny Goddess of Shadow sped toward him. Her arms outstretched, her hair flying behind her, tears streaming down her face.

"Papa! Papa!" Róisín collided with the Prince of the Sun's body. He curled around her, swiftly lifting her into the air. He crushed his daughter to his chest.

"My darling. My precious Róisín. I have missed you," his words were muffled by her hair.

"Papa. I'm so sorry, I don't know what happened. I... I..." Róisín buried her head in his shoulder. She wept, a scared child who was finally reunited with the one who would keep her safe. Mae and the others stood off to the side. Mae started to feel awkward at the reunion, absent-mindedly inspecting her nails so that she didn't stare. She didn't want to break the spell that had fallen over everyone. She did feel the sting of

jealousy, knowing that if she showed up at her own home after being away for so long her parents wouldn't spare her a second thought. Ophelia was shedding her own tears. She hung back, not about to interrupt or interfere, not quite ready to explain who she was. Kiel, in true Kiel fashion lit a cigarette, exhaling blue smoke in a cloud around him.

"It is okay, my little rose. You are home now. You are safe. You are loved." The Prince pulled away from his daughter, gently wiping away her tears. Róisín hung on to her father tight, twisting her hands into his pristine white shirt. Her tears made the material darken. A cat came out of the palace then, silently stalking toward the Gods, watching them with his rose-colored eyes. He sat down behind them, swishing his tail side to side, and started to lick his black paw. As if ready to move on with the homecoming, he let out a soft *mew*. Róisín peered at him over her father's shoulder.

"Darius! My sweet baby kitty!" She squirmed out of the God of Light's arms and smothered the black cat with her entire body. He let out a frustrated noise but started licking her face. "I missed you Dari! I love you. Did you take good care of mama and papa?" She squished his face, kissing him between the eyes. He *mewed* in return, rubbing his head into her chin, the affection between the two palpable.

"Excuse me, your... godliness?" Mae said quietly, her voice scratchy. The God turned to her, rising from where he was crouched down beside his daughter. He towered above them. Mae had to crane her neck back, stepping back slightly and almost falling. He looked at them. Confusion marred the sharp plains of his face. Suddenly his eyes lit up. Mae could see the sunset in them. Without a glance at Mae's face, he said.

"Orion." He stared at the bird on Mae's shoulder. "Orion! Is that you? It has been an age!" The God's face split into a smile. Orion let out a shriek, pushing off Mae as he took off into the bright blue sky. He circled above their heads, growing to full height. He swooped and spun delighted. He landed beside the Prince of the Sun, crossing his wing and lowering into a deep bow. The Prince walked up to Orion and ran a hand over his plumage. His fire tipped fingers running along the bird's gold ones.

"My old friend, I never thought I would see you again," the Prince said. Orion pecked at his hands, bobbing his head up and down in agreement.

“Pardon me?” Kiel spoke up then. “Orion is an eagle? A really neat one, sure, but still an animal. So... like... how do you know each other?” Mae stared ahead, bracing herself for the answer. She had come to learn that everything in her life had happened a certain way for a reason.

“Orion, like Darius here, is from this realm. He is a fallen star.”



“A fallen star? What does that even mean?” Mae demanded; vexation wormed into her mind. She let out an exasperated breath. “I have had just about enough of these wild claims to last me a lifetime. Why are half of the people I love apparently from here? With all due respect, sir, can someone please explain everything to me?”

“I see you have the spunk of your father, Maeva of Elecara.”

“By the...” She cut herself short, not wanting to use the Lady's name in vain in her own realm. Trying a new tactic, she calmed the anger rising in her chest. “Can you please just explain something, anything? It has been a long few days. I am exhausted. I need a drink, I need a bath, I need sleep and I need honesty.”

“Of course, Maeva,” the Prince chuckled, his sunset eyes sparkled, like a lake on a warm summer's day “Why don't we meet in the garden, I can at least take care of the thirst and some of the explanations.”

The garden was breathtaking. Lush greenery spread out all around them. Every flower you could think of was in full bloom. Forget-me-nots grew alongside oversized calla lilies. Sunflowers turned their yellow and brown faces to the sun. Mae wandered over to a patch of white flowers, their delicate petals appeared to have golden veins running through them, one long petal reaching halfway down the stem. The flower itself glowing from within.

“Moonsbreath,” the Prince said, coming up behind her. Mae jumped, startled by the God's silent arrival. “She created it, you know, my wife, the Lady of Darkness, when our daughters were born.” His breath hitched. He stared out over the garden, sadness radiating out of him. It washed over Mae in waves. She felt just as crushed as he did. She couldn't understand why the God was upset, his daughter was home, they were a family again.

“Come, sit, I brought tea,” he said, the despair sloughed off his shoulders like a change of clothing. He led her toward a small wooden

gazebo.

"With all due respect, tea... just isn't going to cut it I'm afraid." She didn't want to offend the god by denying tea, but she had had too much happen in the past few days that hot leaf water wasn't going to take care of.

"Like I said, same spunk as your father, whiskey more your speed?"

"Please!" she said gleefully. She joined her friends who were sitting on lush benches, covered in oversized pillows. Gossamer curtains blew in the gentle breeze, giving the whole place a sense of peace and relaxation. Mae brought a small cup to her lips. The amber liquid hit her tongue, burning as it went down her throat. She looked at the Prince of the Sun expectantly.

"Where should I start?" He tapped his chin, his other arm around Róisín as if to protect her. A look passed over his face. Fear? Fear of losing her again.

"Orion," Mae said, desperately needing answers, but she wanted to start with something small. Better to lessen the blow before jumping all the way in. She looked out into the garden as the bird of prey and the black cat were playing. Chasing each other and luminflies around the blooms.

"Orion, how does one explain a fallen star... I guess we'll start in the beginning, before The Goddess of the Moon, the Lady of Darkness, there was The Cosmos. The Cosmos created everything. I suppose it is 'The First God', however it was one that did not want the responsibility. It was a lonely being who wanted companionship."

"Being lonely seems to be a running theme among the immortals," Mae quipped. The Prince ignored her and continued.

"When the Moon was created, she refused to speak with The Cosmos, instead choosing to live her life in the Afterworld. Harshly judging mortal souls as if to appease her own anger. The Cosmos then created the stars, the constellations mortals could see in the sky were, in fact, the creatures created as companions for The Cosmos. For a time, there was an uneasy peace in the Afterworld realm. The Moon began carving a name for herself among the mortals as the Lady of Darkness. The Cosmos worried about this, seeing that she needed a counterpart, a light to her dark, and I was brought into existence next.

I don't know what went wrong when I was created, but I was bound to the Heavens of the Afterworld, perhaps because the Cosmos was not my maker, though the beginning of my creation was opaque at best. Unable to

leave my gilded prison, I searched and searched for a way out. The Cosmos would visit when he could, feeling my defeat, he would bring along his star companions, hoping one would take to me and stay. Orion here was the one who found me a way out. A small break in the barrier surrounding the Heavens. I was now free to roam the realm as I pleased. I would sit by the edge of the Darkrael often, contemplating my existence. I suppose I took on the role of soothing new souls, especially children. The Cosmos ultimately decided to step in when it came to the souls of children, for more often than not they are innocent. He created a place for them to exist where nothing would ever harm them again.

The Moon and I had never met, but I could sense another being in the realm. Another God. Eventually, we did meet. We fell in love. Together we ruled, together we judged. Finally, the Afterworld was a fair and just place.

The Cosmos disappeared then; we haven't heard much since. His stars began falling to the Earth in the mortal realm. These creatures with powers to change their shapes or their sizes. I am not sure why they chose this time to fall, but there is always a reason." The Prince stopped for a moment, watching Darius and Orion again. Orion had shrunk down to his smallest height, hiding behind a giant leafy bush, while Darius shifted from a cat to a small black bee and flew above Orion's head, dipping down to antagonize him.

"If I had to make a guess, it would be that The Cosmos was tired. Having to be judge, jury and executioner before we were created and took over. If I was to assume, The Cosmos is hiding somewhere in the mortal realm, getting some well-deserved rest. I would say that the stars falling to the Earth were joining The Cosmos so it would never be lonely again. That is probably how Orion ended up there, with you. The Prince finished, trailing off and looking out to the two fallen stars before him again.

"That is a very... that is definitely a story," Mae said. She whistled. Orion flew over, perching on her shoulder, digging his talons into the soft leather cap on her shoulder. "So, you're a fallen star, are you?" she said to the bird. He chirped back in return.

Yes. Was the answer that went through her head.

"Alright then... I guess I'm really too tired to argue about it."

"Here's what I don't understand," Kiel said. The Prince turned toward him, gesturing for him to continue. "If you and the Lady took over the

responsibility of judging incoming souls, why did The Cosmos leave? There was no reason for it... he didn't have to go anywhere.”

“You are correct, Kiel,” a new voice boomed from the gate of the garden.

“I am? That's new...”

“Hello Keeper, to what do we owe the pleasure?” The Prince stood up. He bent at the waist, crossing an arm over his chest as he bowed low to the older man who was making his way to the gazebo. The Keeper stepped into the gazebo, pulling the hood back of his cloak. He leveled his dragon-like eye with the group, stopping to stare at Mae. His milky blind eye bore deep into her soul. She knew those eyes. Only one person looked like that.

“Fletcher?” she said, choking on her drink.



“Maeva, my sweet girl.” The Keeper, Fletcher, gathered her into a hug. “I'm so sorry I had to leave you.”

“Fletcher...” She sobbed, her chest heaving. She buried her face in the soft velvet of his cloak. She felt like she was ten years old again, the depression opening a hole in her heart that she was never able to mend. Although this man looked different than the one who had helped her become the person she was; his skin was darker, more wrinkled, flaking and gray. His hair was longer, white, falling around his shoulders, but she would never forget those eyes. She felt small again, as he stroked her curls and rubbed small comforting circles on her back.

“Hush child, it is okay. I am here now. Please, stop crying. Let me explain.” Mae looked up to the old man, the man she considered a father. She felt her heart break over and over as she remembered coming to find him on that morning. Slumped in his chair, never to tell her another story again. She felt so confused, but nodded her head, finally untangling herself from The Keeper as she settled back into the oversized cushion again. Ophelia took her hand then, but she was too stunned to notice.

“Let me introduce myself to the rest of you. I am The Keeper, or as Maeva knows me in the mortal realm, Fletcher. I will try to keep this short as you all look exhausted.

Let's get this out of the way, it is said there is only one being older than the Lady herself,” he said, gesturing to himself. It took a moment for more

news to process through Mae's brain.

"Are you saying... *you* are The Cosmos? What the hell?" Mae asked. Her head was spinning; she wasn't sure if she would be able to take another revelation. Her friends gaped as the old man in front of them, even Róisín seemed surprised by the news they had just learned. Fletcher simply nodded, then continued.

"The story you just heard was mostly true. I was lonely, and I did create the stars when I created The Moon. I did cause stars to fall to the mortal realm, and I did leave for a while to be alone with them. I returned here as the souls needed a guide to the Afterworld. How did I do this without anyone figuring out who I was? Well, no being took the time to figure out how souls got here. They just knew that they did. It was not hard to appear before the Gods one day as a humble boatman, introducing myself as The Keeper, offering my services to guide souls to their judgment.

The Lady and the Prince were doing a fine job dealing with peace and punishment; however, souls are very confused when they first pass over, and there was trouble having them cross the bridge on their own. This was before Isabelle when there was no one to guide souls through the gate, no one to help them navigate Darkrael. We lost a lot of souls then; you can hear their whispers of turmoil in the valley. Their existence will always be intertwined with the Darkrael now."

So, The Whispering Valley doesn't whisper because of the wind. Mae thought, the idea made her cold. She looked at Fletcher as he continued. He looked tired.

"Being The Cosmos, The Creator, comes with its own burdens. I knew all that was, and I know all that could be. Every past, present and future jumbled in my mind, tangling together into a blur of possibilities. Never solidifying until the person made a decision. Even though it sounds like I created the stars for the sole purpose of keeping me company, they serve another purpose as well. They help keep my mind straight. One creature for every mortal, they take on the burden of holding their past, their present and the threads of their future. This is so I don't delve into madness with every new mortal that is born. As mortals die, the stars return to me, waiting for a new soul to attach themselves to. Life and Death, an endless cycle." Fletcher turned to Mae then, she noticed, the more she looked at him the more he resembled his earthly counterpart. He

was always old, but now he looked ancient. His hands were callused and wrinkled, but he was still Fletcher, the man she loved like a father.

“Now you, my sweet Maeva. Your father is a dear friend of mine. When he met your mother, they did fall in love. However, when he spilled his seed to create you, she became ashamed and banned him from ever being a part of your life. She told the entire Kingdom that he had tricked her, she had no control over what had happened to her. She begged your mortal father to forgive her, and promised she would do everything for him. Essentially, she would be his slave for the rest of her existence.

Your real father came to me, a broken creature. The love he had, and still has, for you is unlike anything I have ever seen in my eons. I made a vow to him that I would see to your protection. I could already sense your mother would leave you on your own to wander the streets, no better than an orphan. I made sure I was the man you tried to pickpocket that night. I vowed then that I would take you in, protect you myself, as a promise to your father. I did the best I could, Maeva. I tried to make sure you grew up with a sense of self-worth,” Fletcher finished quietly. He looked at Mae, adoration and pride lit up his eyes.

“He... loved me? He loves me?” Mae asked, her voice squeaking. She shook her head, refusing to believe it. “Fletcher, you're the only parent I've ever really had... I only believe that you love me.” Fletcher looked to her, affirmation behind his eyes.

“He loves you, Maeva, I love you, Maeva. You have a family who found you, a family who loves you.” He hugged her again, crushing her against his chest. He pulled back, turning to the group to continue his story.

“I had to leave the mortal realm a final time. It pained me. I didn't want to leave you. I knew I had to though. I was running out of time, and you had to learn some things on your own. However, I would never abandon you. I left Orion to watch over you, the star that bound himself to you at the time of your birth.”

“Ri? Is that true?” Mae asked the bird. He chirped a confirmation, nudging his beak into her cheek. “Alright, alright, I love you too.” She wrapped her arms around him. He grew until he was a Mae sized eagle, engulfing her in feathers. She didn't feel the confusion when it came to Orion. They had always been connected. “Why did you leave me, Fletcher?” she asked, dreading the answer.

“Like I said, I had to. The mortal vessel I had inhabited was coming to the end of its natural cycle. I would not be able to continue on the earth. I knew your future, and at least most possibilities pointed to this one. I knew you would return to me one day. As much as it pained me to leave, it was my time.” Fletcher bowed to the Prince then. “And to you, I apologize for being as selfish as I am, I am but a tired old being. I have caused a great deal of heartache, but I will do everything in my power to aid you in her return.”

Her return? Who's return? Mae noticed as a tight look crossed The God of Light's face, his lips a bloodless grim line. He nodded, once and curt. She stood up and took Fletcher's hand.

“Can we talk alone?” she asked.

“Of course, my dear.”

The pair of them wandered away from the gazebo, walking side by side. Mae was quiet for a long time. She brushed her fingers along the soft leaves of the bushes, letting the fresh green smell surround her. She stopped in front of the moonflowers again.

“I know this is a lot to take in.” Fletcher broke the silence.

“That's an understatement,” Mae said, causing Fletcher to laugh, a deep hearty sound. She ached. She had never gotten over his death, or his not death, but him leaving.

“Oh Maeva, I have missed you.”

“I missed you too Fletcher. I cried over you for so long,” she whined, feeling like that child who was abandoned again.

“I know, child, I am sorry, truly. I saw your future; I knew what was coming. I know what is still yet to come, although it is muddy as no clear path has been decided yet.” He patted her hand, a small gesture, but one that made her feel comforted.

“Fletcher, so much has happened since you left me. I... I don't even...” Fletcher held up a hand to stop Mae.

“I know, Maeva, I know all. Orion also kept in contact with me. Now, tell me about this girl. You love her?” She stared at him, wide eyed, mouth hanging open.

“Maeva, close your mouth, flies will get in. Again, The Cosmos, The Creator, the stars.” He stopped but continued to wave his hand, knowing he didn't have to go on. Mae sighed.

Might as well tell the truth.

“More than anything, Fletcher, but I could never be good enough for her. You know who she is don't you?”

“I do,” he said flatly, a dark look crossing his face.

“Of course, of course you do. So, why didn't you just tell everyone everything and avoid this whole mess?” she pleaded; her voice strained.

“Sometimes to figure out who we are, we must find ourselves alone. Through trials and tribulations is how we get stronger, develop a sense of self. Even the Gods themselves need to learn things. Also, I'm bound by laws that I created to not interfere with things as much as possible, and I know Isabelle told you that I was the one who kept Ophelia away from here, I regret it every day that I still have not told The Gods the truth. That I am the reason for their anguish, the reason for their lost daughter.” His shoulders dropped. A weight settled on them from holding a secret in for so long. Mae could not blame him, she would do the same thing.

“You interfered with me,” Mae pointed out.

“Ahh, no Maeva, I watched over you, guided you, but in the end, you made your own decisions. I could not be prouder of the young woman you have become.” He beamed at her. She shook her head as more tears formed in the corners of her eyes. She knew what he said was mostly true. She was always striving to impress Fletcher, but she had also been able to make her own decisions, having to live with the outcome on her own. What stuck out to her though was that The Keeper said he was proud of her. She slammed into his chest, grabbing the fabric of his cloak in her fists, crying.

“No one has ever said they were proud of me.” she whispered.

“I will always be proud of you,” Fletcher replied, kissing her hair. She looked up at her father, because she had to face it. Her mortal parents would never be anything important to her, but he was. Smiling, Mae continued about Ophelia.

“I don't know what she sees in me, Fletcher, she is a Goddess, I'm a half-breed. I could never be good enough for her.” She couldn't shake the feeling of inadequacy.

“You were good enough for her before you found out who she was. So, what has changed?” Fletcher asked her. Mae shrugged her shoulders, feeling defeated. She knew she had no good explanation for why she felt that she wasn't good enough anymore. She just wasn't.

“I don't know...”

“Stop being your own daemon, Maeva. You are the only one getting in your way,” he said to her, warmth filled his voice. She knew he was right.

“I...” She stopped short. She dipped her head once in agreement. They continued to walk on in silence. Mae’s thoughts were abuzz in her mind.

If Fletcher believes in me, maybe I really could be good enough for her. I want to be... maybe I am my own Daemon. I have to speak with her.

“Fletcher?” She had a question that burned into her.

“Yes Maeva?” He stroked his long beard, much longer than Mae could ever remember. He was only the essence of the man he was in the mortal.

“Are you still close with my father?”

“I am. In fact, he is also very close with The God of Light. Perhaps you will see him while you are here. I am sure the two of you have much to talk about.” Mae considered this. Was he here right now?

“Why was he at the bridge that day?” she asked.

“As head of the Guard, he is obligated to oversee the ceremony of truth that a soul must go through before being judged before the Lady of Darkness and the Prince of the Sun. He is there to ensure that no one is planning on bringing harm to the Gods. Although... there was one time...”

“One time? Did my father fail to protect the gods?”

Was he there when Balo came here?

“It is not my place, Maeva. In fact I have already said too much. I will leave the Prince to explain everything.” He crushed her in another hug. Even though this man looked like he was flaking away he had the strength of all the universe. “I must go. I have to prepare a few things.”

“But... we just... I just got you back,” Mae pouted. She never wanted to let him out of her sight again. Ten-year-old Mae wanted to chain him to her so he could never leave her side.

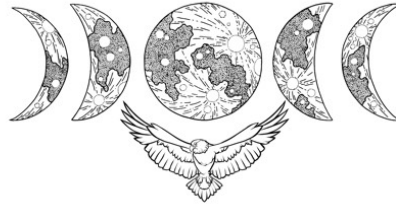
“And I will never leave you again, child, but there are still preparations to be done. Darius needs to eat, since apparently a fallen star can't feed itself,” he said, motioning toward the cat. Mae watched as they left the garden, Darius trotting along behind his robes. He swiped and pounced at his feet. Orion hopped around her, chirping at the cat. Fletcher turned back and lifted his hand, waving to her and blowing her a kiss. She caught it with her hand and held it to her chest. She walked back to the gazebo.

As she made her way back to her friends, she heard a lot of noise ahead of her. Finally, a voice broke through everyone else.

“Oh, papa!” Róisín exclaimed, true delight in her voice, the first Mae had ever heard her so happy. She grabbed her father's sleeve and tugged him over, stopping in front of Ophelia.

“Papa! This is Ophelia. My sister!”

Chapter Sixteen



The God of Light stared at Róisín, his mouth open and shut while he tried to find words. He looked to Ophelia, then at Mae, then back to Ophelia. Confusion oozed out of his very being.

“Róisín, sweetheart... your sister has been gone since you were a baby. You have never even known her. She’s been missing since before you were babbling; we’ve never been able to locate her...” He trailed off, overcome with grief. He held his head in his hands, unable to look up at his daughter.

“Papa... this *is* my sister. The Keeper hid her in plain sight, a woman, Isabelle, took care of her,” Róisín insisted, trying to pull the Prince over to the newfound Goddess. He looked at her warily.

“Isabelle? Cottage by the gates of Darkrael, Isabelle? The Keeper?” Confusion twisted the Prince’s features, trying to remember the woman he met so long ago.

“Yes papa. Ophelia is The Goddess of Flame! My sister.” She was delighted, dancing around her father’s legs while pushing him closed to Ophelia.

“How?” he asked, dumbfounded. Ophelia stepped up to him. She placed a small hand on his shoulder, her tapered fingers trembling slightly. She drew a breath and told the entire story of their journey so far.

“Isabelle brewed a tea for me, and I *transformed*. I don’t know if I feel any different. I feel older, I think. I...” Ophelia faltered. “I am still confused, I think. Isabelle was in every way a mother to me for the short time I remember her being in my life. As much as I feel like her story is

true, it's hard for me to think of you all as my family... yet. I loved Isabelle, and it took me a long time to get over her death the first time, and now she has..." Ophelia stopped short, looking torn.

"She has decided to pass on to the Afterworld," Mae finished for her, rubbing small circles on Ophelia's back.

"Decided to?" The Prince looked to Mae, waiting patiently for her to continue.

"Listen, I don't know the details, because she didn't provide them. She said she was ready to go. That she gave too much to the Earth. Then she wandered into the crowd of souls, and we lost track of her. I assume if you want to know anything else you should probably talk to Fle... The Keeper," Mae replied, trying to keep the irritation out of her voice since she was talking to a God. She was trying to stay strong, for Ophelia's sake.

"I believe I will. First... Ophelia, would you please look at me?" The Prince said gently, as he reached out to her. He caressed her cheek as she raised her eyes ever so slowly. The Prince gasped.

"Only one person in the entire Heavens and Afterworld has been born with those eyes." He pulled his hands back, as if she was made of porcelain, and bent down to her. He took both of her hands in his and whispered, "My dear baby girl, Ophelia, my flame. We have been searching for centuries for you. We have never forgotten you. Welcome home." He drew her into an embrace, motioning to Róisín to join them. The child jumped up, giddy, and joined her sister and father. She was squished between them, the smile on her face reaching from ear to ear. Mae could see she was the happiest she had ever been. Ophelia was cautious, but she smiled as well.

"We have to take you to mama. She will be absolutely thrilled that you are back." Róisín pulled at Ophelia's hand, trying to get her to stand up. Ophelia stared at the two Gods, looking very overwhelmed with their fast acceptance. She rose, and turned toward the Prince of the Sun, her father. A dark look passed over his face again, like a thunderstorm that had come to block the sun.

"Róisín..." the Prince cautioned.

"Papa, come *on!* Mama will be so happy. She has wanted Ophelia back for so long." Róisín tugged at the two Gods, hopping up and down.

"I understand Róisín, and I would love for Ophelia and your mother to be reunited right now, but unfortunately they can't." The Prince's voice

fell, a storm rolled above. The golden afternoon light darkened with the Prince's mood. Mae felt a fierce wind pick up. She grabbed Kiel's arm to steady herself.

"What do you mean? Where's mama?" Róisín started toward the palace. Rain fell around her. The Prince followed her swiftly. "Mama! Mama! Ophelia's back!" she shouted, as the rain became a sheet Mae couldn't see through. The Prince took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. He turned his eyes down as the rain started to dissipate, although the storm clouds remained.

"Róisín, my love, please come here," he said quietly, patting the open spot beside him.

"What is it Papa?" Róisín asked. She looked around her at the rain and clouds finally realizing her father was upset.

"It's your mother. I'm so sorry Róisín, when he... *Balo*..." The Prince spat his name, like a sour lemon. "When he took you, he..."

Mae sat quietly waiting for the God of Light to continue. She had never seen a God struggle with anything. Granted, she had never seen a God before Róisín since Ophelia couldn't be counted.

"Papa, please..." Róisín barely whispered.

"He took your mother," he finally managed.



Mae couldn't even comprehend what she had just heard. Not only had Balo managed to capture one Goddess, he captured *the* Goddess. Ophelia's father seemed to be coming apart at the seams, it appeared that the story Isabelle told them earlier was at the very least true. She was unsure what they could do to stop all this. How do you stop someone bent on destruction? On destroying every life they come in contact with? How do you even begin to reason with someone who wants to challenge the Gods? Mae shook her head. The voices in the garden started creeping into her mind, becoming clearer and clearer.

"What do you mean he took mama?" Róisín cried. She slammed her small body to the ground, falling in a heap.

"Exactly that, little rose." The Prince tried to put his arm around his daughter, to comfort her in some small way, but she pushed away from him, curling in on herself. Small enough to disappear altogether.

“How?” she asked, her voice strangled, coming out in a rasp. “It should have been almost impossible for him to take me. How did he take her too?” The Prince took a deep breath, he held it for minutes. As he let it out slowly, he dragged his sun dipped hands down his face. He was the embodiment of exhaustion.

“It's a long story.” He closed himself off, flooding his arms over his great chest.

“Well, I'm sure we have a little bit of time now, don't we?” Ophelia asked quietly.

“The plot thickens,” Kiel whispered dramatically from behind Mae. She reached back and smacked his arm.

“Shut up.” She heard him take a sharp breath in but he remained silent.

Kiel, you useless dolt. Don't you ever know when to keep your mouth shut? By the Gods, you're lucky I love you, or I would be flaying those flapping lips right off your face. Mae thought to herself, glad that Kiel seemed to have gotten the hint.

Ignoring Kiel's comment, the Prince sat back, leaning into a shrub, the sharp twigs snagging his wheat blonde hair.

“Well, I don't know how much you remember from that day Róisín,” he started tentatively, looking to Róisín.

“Not much honestly... the walls blowing in, screaming for mama, and a lot of black and silence,” she replied, shaking slightly, probably remembering her time beneath the manor. Ophelia slid over to her, putting an arm around her.

“Well, let me start by filling in some blank spots.” A look of anguish pinched the Prince's face, causing his eyebrows to draw in and his mouth to twist in a grimace. He started the story of the last day.

“That fateful morning started like any other. It was not a judgment day, so I made my way down to the dining hall.

It's far too large here I thought to myself. I began making plans to finally create a beautiful oasis for my lovely wife and daughter, a small chalet style home, gorgeous, picturesque windows overlooking Nyneve's cove. A tiny, but still opulent home worthy of Mother Moon and her shadow.

‘She's only been asking for centuries now,’ I said under my breath. Stopping at the door to the dining hall I put my hand on the elaborate wood grain. I could hear my girls on the other side. Little Róisín was in

the middle of telling her mother about her dreams the night before, something about Eluna and a mercreature. I push the door as silently as I can, not wanting to interrupt the animated story. My Goddess, my love, looked up then.

‘Good morning! How lovely of you to join us, my dear,’ she chided, a small smile crossing her beautiful pale face.

‘Apologies, My Lady,’ I replied, bowing low, lifting my eyes and winking at her.

‘Oh, my love it is far too early for the formalities. Sit, eat, Róisín is telling a lovely story.’ I drifted across the expansive hall, settling into the chair between my two girls. Róisín, you continued on with the story of your dream and your mother and I ate, stealing glances across the table. I don’t remember much of the food or any other conversation.

Afterward, you went off to your lessons. Your mother and I wandered the hallways. Making preparations for the next judgment day and enjoying each other’s company. Turran ran up then.”

“Who is Turran?” Mae interrupted

“My head of Guard. Most trusted Daemon in the Afterworld, the one creature who has my entire life, the life of my family, in his cloven hooves,” he said proudly.

Head of the guard? She remembered what Fletcher had said: this was her father they were talking about. She listened with most interest now, wanting to hear anything about the man who was half of her. No matter how much she thought she hated him.

“Turran taught me a lot of things!” Róisín smiled. “How to use a knife, how to hide in my shadows, how to gut a man thirteen ways before he hits the ground.” She sounded wistful, as fond of the head of the guard as her father was.

“Definitely sounds like someone who should be around kids,” Kiel said. Mae heard the strike of a match and knew he was smoking again. She laughed to herself. He sounded a lot like Fletcher. Perhaps she would end up liking her father after all.

“This is all well and good, but can we please continue? And Kiel, can you mind your mouth, please?” Ophelia said. She huffed a breath out in frustration. Mae could see that Kiel was getting on her nerves, but she, for one was grateful that he was here.

“Yes, there is a lot to tell and little time to tell it,” the Prince confirmed.

“Turran ran up then,

‘Sir! You are needed at the front gate, immediately!’

‘Immediately? Turran can you not see out of those bloody eyes of yours? I am currently with the Lady of Darkness.’ Turran bowed low to her, turning back to me.

‘My sincerest apologies, but there has been a breach sir. Your presence is required to keep the bloodshed to a minimum.’

‘Bloodshed? I am so sorry, my love, we will have to reconvene later. Lunch perhaps?’ I kissed her once on her three eyes, each cheek and her lips.

‘I love you as the day turns to night and you light my sky.’

‘Go, my love. I will spend some time with Róisín, she needs to practice her shadow work.’ She smiled. Little did I know that would be the last time I would see her radiant face.

Turran rushed me forward, through the labyrinth of hallways.

We really do need something smaller for day-to-day life. Is what ran through my head while we ran. Arriving at the gates breathless, I could hear commotion all around me.

‘The gates!’

‘He’s through!’

‘The Lady, help us all.’

I made my way up the guard tower, peering down at the rock face the palace sat atop. It was a few minutes before I realized what I was looking at. Slowly, the figure came into view.

One man. One man stalked toward the palace, a cape billowing behind him. Even from the tower, I could see the look of malice on his face. I ran down the steps of the tower and out to the path. I know this man. I thought. I walked up to him.

‘Balo, to what do I owe the dishonor?’

‘Oh, shut up you sniveling God. I’ve no quarrel with you. I am here for your wife.’

‘I apologize, she is currently indisposed. How did you get here, anyway?’

‘That is on a need-to-know basis. Now, get out of my way.’ He shot a fist at me, covered in what looked to be a glove made of solid silvered iron.

I yelled for Turran to run to tell you and your mother. Hoping against hope he wouldn't get there too late."

"There is not much I can remember after this. I awoke to find myself sprawled on the ground, a gash in my arm deep enough to see bone through. I can only guess that he used my blood to make the binding spell to take both Róisín and Mother Moon. There are not many in any of the realms who can do this anymore, a few sorceresses who live in the Kingdom. From my research, I have found one must be able to harness the power of the elements to bind the blood of a God. I made haste toward the library, limping and in pain. Although Balo must have approached alone, he had an army with him. No man could do the kind of damage that was inflicted. I was so afraid of what I was going to find." The Prince blew out a breath, running his hands through his hair, down his face and rubbing his neck.

"I am sure we all know what happened next. My beloved, and my little rose. Gone. I had no idea where they had been taken, but I swore I would get you back. I have been looking for you every day since. I have searched the kingdom high and low, but I had not been able to locate you. I did not want you to feel like I had abandoned you..." He took his daughter's hand,

"I'm so sorry Róisín, I should have protected you better. I should have found you sooner. I don't even want to know the horrors you faced at the hand of that man. I did not do right by you, by either of you." He looked at Ophelia. "The best I can do to help you now is find your mother."

"It is okay, papa," Róisín said, her voice soft and thick with tears. She hugged her father around his middle, her pale hands getting paler as she held tight. "I know you wanted us to be together again. I know you would never abandon me or mama."

"And I... well it appeared that you knew less than I did about my disappearance, or at least about where I have been for the past hundreds of years. So, I can't fault you," Ophelia said quietly.



The rest of the afternoon passed in a blur. Mae watched as Ophelia grew more confident in her rightful place in the Afterworld. Holding herself with a delicate grace, her sun kissed hands folded in her lap. Her laughs started to come easier, her eyes sparkled. It seemed like her whole

body grew more relaxed as the golden light returned and then dimmed around to silky black.

Mae tipped her head up, looking for the moon. Noticing it was absent. She wondered if this was because the Lady was missing, or a coincidence. From what she had learned, though, nothing is ever a coincidence. As the first stars pricked the darkness, Ophelia yawned.

"I believe we should all retire for the evening. We can begin again in the morning. We will get your mother back. I vow this to the both of you." The Prince stood up, gesturing for the group to follow him inside. Mae heard Kiel shift behind her, groaning as he got up from sitting all afternoon.

"I could do with food, a bath, a bed, and maybe a lady."

"You will get three of those things." The Prince glared. Kiel burst out laughing, and the Prince smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. Kiel could make anyone laugh; it was Mae's favorite thing about him. "Unless you want a romp in the sack with a soul, that is." The Prince winked. It was Kiel's turn to glare.

"Nah, that's okay. I'll wait til I'm back in the world of the living," Kiel deadpanned, the Prince staring him down until they both burst out laughing. The group walked down the hall, which was floor to ceiling black. They came to a door, dusty rose in color, with gray shadows dancing along the bottom. A rose was carved into the elegant wood.

"This is me," Róisín said sleepily, trying to hide the yawn.

"Goodnight little Ró," Mae said. Ophelia wrapped her in a hug, and Kiel high fived her. They watched as the little Goddess made her way into her room. Mae stood there to make sure she was safe in her room before they continued on. The Prince deposited Kiel at a simple but beautiful door. He made a gesture before lifting up his arms and sniffing.

"Yuck. I'll be lounging in the bath. If either of you ladies want to join." He winked. Mae barked out a laugh.

"Only in your wildest dreams, Casanova. Get some rest. Apparently, we still have a long way to go." Mae waved her fingers and Kiel blew the girls a kiss before shutting his door. They could hear him behind it, muffled but in awe.

"I could buy a whole house with this blanket!"

"Don't even think about it Kiel, we're... you're a guest here," Ophelia said, laughing softly to herself. The God of Light led them further down

the luxurious hallway. Mae admired the gold and black accents. Warm light filtered into the hallway from small flames that seemed to float in midair. As Ophelia walked by them, it appeared as if the flames got a little brighter. The silver and red flickered and danced. Showing off and posing for their lost Goddess.

She really is a sight isn't she? The Goddess of Flame. They came to the last door in the hallway. A warm yellow started from the bottom, curling and blending to a brilliant scarlet at the top. There was nothing carved on this door, but Mae had no doubt the room behind would be perfect for Ophelia.

"We have always kept a room for you here, hoping we would have you back one day. I do hope you find everything to your liking. If you need anything at all, there is a bell you can ring, someone will come- day or night. I love you my precious flame." The Prince kissed Ophelia's cheek and bowed to Mae. She looked around feeling uncomfortable, a God should not be bowing to a halfling. Did he know who she was? "I thank you for returning her to me. I am forever in your debt Maeva of Elecara. For tonight, I have personally seen to the preparations of a room for you right here." He swept his hand to the door that lay directly across from Ophelia's.

"I hope you find it comfortable. I will bid you two adieu. I will have Turran or Melanya, my wife's maid in waiting, retrieve you in the morning for breakfast." A tired look passed over him then. He waved and turned, his boots clacking down the hall until Mae couldn't hear them anymore.

"Can I come in?" Ophelia asked tentatively.

"You want to come in here? With me?" Mae stared wide eyed, trying to hide her pleasure at hearing Ophelia ask.

"Please?" Ophelia pleaded. Mae opened the door to the dark room beyond.

"Anything for you, Princess." Ophelia brushed by her, her skirt swishing as she turned around the room.

"Goddess," Ophelia said, playfully as she turned around in a circle. Mae closed the door quietly behind her.

"Anything for you, Goddess," she whispered.

The room was perfect. A beautiful hearth sat along one wall, a fire already roaring inside, casting the room in a low glow. A large window looked out over the cliff that the palace sat upon. The landscape before her

was beautiful. Gentle rolling hills glowed purple beneath the midnight dark sky. Flowers of every color were blooming even though it was night. A great bed carved of mahogany, stained a deep cherry red sat in the corner opposite the fire. One could lay in bed and fall asleep watching the flames dance around. Mae felt as if she was back at home, in her cozy cottage. Orion must have felt the same. He flew off Mae's shoulder landing on the soft fur rug that was set in front of the hearth. He let out a quiet chirp before preening himself. Finally he ruffled his whole body, tucking his beak underneath his wing. The fallen star fell asleep within seconds.

"You never change, do you?" Mae said to the sleeping bird. She could hear Ophelia moving toward her, felt her hand slip into hers, their fingers entwined. Butterflies fought their way up her throat. It was like the first time Ophelia held her hand.

"Mae, what is wrong?" Ophelia asked, concern filled her face, making her even more beautiful.

"I..." Mae started, fumbling over her words. She sucked in a breath, hissing it out through her teeth.

Might as well get this over with.

"I am going to miss you so much, Lia. When this is all over, you'll stay here with your family, and me? Well, I will go back to Elecara with Kiel. I'm sorry I can never be enough for you." She kicked absently at the floor. Ophelia grabbed her chin, forcing her to lift her face and look at her. She was stunning. Mae wanted to kiss every part of her face. Make love to her in front of the fire, curl up with her in bed and never wake up from her dream world.

"Maeva," Ophelia said sternly. "Get it out of your head now. You *are* good enough for me. Being a Goddess will never change the way I feel about you. You are *my* moon; you are all of my stars. I love you. Not a soul in the Afterworld is ever going to change that." Mae felt tears spring to her eyes, again. Ophelia crashed into her; her mouth kissed her with an intensity that made Mae feel faint. Mae opened her mouth and felt Ophelia's soft tongue flick and dance over hers, shivered raced down her spine. Mae pushed Ophelia toward the bed. They collapsed in a flurry of leather and silk. Mae rolled Ophelia underneath her, placing both hands beside her head. She kissed Ophelia once, then trailed a line of kisses down her jaw. She heard Ophelia sigh. Lifting her eyes, Mae said seriously,

“I love you too, Ophelia, you are my fire, my inferno. I would move the planets for you.” She kissed her again, harder, a fever swallowed her body, she was on fire. Mae lifted Ophelia up with her, undoing the lace that held her dress together. It fell in a puddle of silk around her torso. Mae sat back, admiring every inch of the beautiful Goddess of Flame. Her hands started to wander.

“Ophelia, you are the most beautiful creature I have ever laid eyes upon. There is nothing I wouldn't do for you. Let me worship you,” Mae murmured and wrapped her arms around Ophelia, pushing her down onto the bed again. She heard the soft moans start as Ophelia pressed into her.

“I can't get enough of you Mae,” she moaned; her eyes half lidded. Ophelia let out a yawn then, causing Mae to stop, lying beside her.

“You are exhausted,” Mae pointed out.

“Not exhausted enough,” Ophelia protested, trying to lead Mae back on top of her.

“Ophelia, no.” She grabbed her wrists gently and firmly. “You need to sleep. There is plenty of time for me to ravish you when this is all over. For now, you are safe, you are loved, you are my Goddess.” Ophelia pouted, her perfect pink lips beckoning Mae, but she held back, knowing Ophelia was exhausted. She kissed her white hair, breathing in her scent. Vanilla and citrus. “I'm going to take a walk, please sleep,” Mae begged.

“I want you here,” Ophelia whined, her words getting slow as she got more tired.

“I will be back before you wake. Goodnight, Lia, I love you.” Mae helped Ophelia out of the rest of her dress, laying her back down.

“I... lurv yew t...” Ophelia mumbled, drifting off to sleep. Her chest rose and fell evenly. Mae pulled the blanket around Ophelia, wrapping her in fur-lined warmth, hoping it would suffice until she returned.

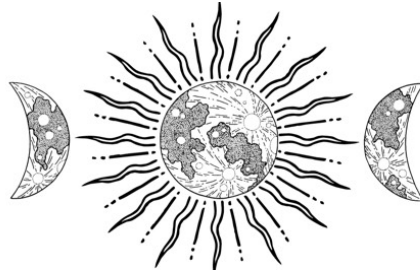
“My fire, my inferno,” she whispered, making her way toward the door, the soft click of the latch the only sound as she closed it behind her.

I will move planets for you.

Her feet padded along the marbled floor of the palace. She passed the room Kiel was staying in, hearing the soft splash as he got out of the bath, or in. She turned down a new hallway, one made entirely of glass. The sky above her stretched on and on, stars crowding her vision. She noted again the absence of the moon, hoping when the Lady was back in her realm the moon would be returned to the sky.

She continued along, lost in her thoughts. She wasn't sure how but some way she was going to have to find a way to stay with Ophelia when this was all over. Lost in thought, she didn't hear the footsteps coming down the hall toward her. Something grabbed her shoulder. Mae let out a blood-curdling scream.

The Lady of Darkness



You are the Lady of Darkness. The First Goddess, you are Mother Moon.

You are the Lady of Darkness. The First Goddess, you are Mother Moon.

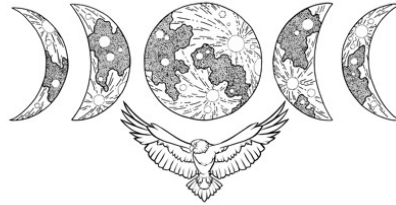
You are the Lady of Darkness. The First Goddess, you are Mother Moon.

She wept. Tears light starlight fell from her eyes.

You are the Lady of Darkness. The First Goddess, you are Mother Moon.

Remember who you are.

Chapter Seventeen



Mae let her fists fly out in the darkness. She felt one connect with something hard. She heard the *smack* as her fist connected with muscle.

“Can. You.” She didn't give the figure a chance to finish their sentence. She crouched down and swept her foot out in an arc, taking the figure's legs out from under it. Its body slammed into the marble floor. She heard the *whomp* as the air went out of the thing's lungs, the crunch as a bone snapped.

“Stop. Please.” It heaved, rolling onto its side.

“Who the fuck are you?” she demanded, kicking out again at the figure. Her boot connected repeatedly with the thing's stomach.

“It's. It's. Turran.” The figure finally managed.

“Turran? By the Lady! What are you doing sneaking around here at night? You're going to get yourself killed.” She bent down to inspect the wounds she had inflicted, hoping that he wasn't bleeding too much.

“Not. Sneaking. Can't. Sneak.” Turran heaved, clutching his stomach. He vomited on the floor. Mae jumped back.

“Obviously you can, since you did,” she pointed out.

“Hooves. Loud,” he said between breaths.

“Riight. So, I was just lost in thought. Gotcha,” Mae snipped; she didn't want to admit that someone had snuck up on her because she was very much lost in her own thoughts. “Now, why are you sneaking around in the middle of the night?” She was satisfied that he wasn't bleeding too much and sat back on her heels.

“Came. To.” He heaved again, groaning. Mae offered her hand, small compared to his, which reminded her of dinner plates. She helped the head of the guard up off the floor.

“I’m sorry,” she said, sincerely.

“It’s. Okay.” He stood, trying to catch his breath. He smiled a little. Pride beamed over his face.

“Nothing broken? Good, I really am sorry. What can I do for you?”

“First of all, I wouldn’t want to catch you off guard on a bad night. Pretty sure you’d kill me. Second, I was hoping to speak with you,” he said, laughing. She tried to return his smile, but was still unnerved that he had surprised her.

“Alright, well, you got me.” She stared at the Daemon as he rose to his full height. This was her father. She was still confused about how she felt about him. She was still angry with him for damning her to a life as a halfling, but was he really all that bad?

“Let’s find somewhere a bit more comfortable.” He started down the hallway, his hooves clicking like thunder in the quiet. Mae rushed to keep up with his long strides. He led her through a maze of hallways, old paintings flashed by her, landscapes mostly. She lost track of how many turns they had made. Finally, he stopped in front of a set of beautifully carved double doors. They soared above her head. She looked up, teetering and almost fell on her behind trying to see the top of them.

“Wow, where are we?” she asked, breathless from trying to keep up.

“The library,” Turran replied curtly.

“Like... *the library*? Where it all happened?” She was in disbelief; she was going to see the place where the Goddesses had been captured. Her nerves were electric, she was jittery, ready to run but frozen in place, waiting to see the room on the other side.

“Yes, but it has been repaired now.” He pushed open the doors and led Mae through the stacks of books, thousands of volumes bound in leather. The shelves climbed into the air. She saw books strewn about tables, as if abandoned in the middle of being read. She took a deep breath, filling her nose with the smell of old parchment and oiled leather. A smell she didn’t think she would like, but one that seemed to suit the library perfectly. They came upon two oversized chairs. Turran gestured for her to sit down.

“I have been wanting to speak with you for a long time, Maeva,” his voice boomed through the stacks of books, a deep comforting sound.

“A long time? Turran, I've been here for less than a day.” She quirked an eyebrow up, looking at the Daemon before her. His cloven hooves gave way to powerful legs, muscles rippling in his calves. He was dressed simply in trousers and an open shirt. The deep v of the neckline showing the outline of a strong chest. His arms were the size of tree limbs, he rested them on his knees leaning forward. White horns spiraled and towered above his head. He looked at her, unblinking. His leaf-green eyes bore a close resemblance to her own. She recalled what she had learned that afternoon.

“Dad?” she ventured, unsure of how she felt. The word tasted like ash in her mouth. She had never even used that word to describe Fletcher, and he was her father in all senses of the word.

“Maeva, my beautiful girl,” he replied, grabbing her hands in his. They folded over hers. “I am so sorry. For everything,” he said, his voice scratchy.

“I don't understand...” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“You said you were no one *important!* You're the head of the fucking guard! The one Daemon The God of Light trusts! You protect the Lady of Darkness! For crying out loud, you might be the most important person in this palace right now!” she bellowed, the words flowing from her mouth. She was angry with him; he had lied to her from the very beginning.

“And yet, I still failed to protect them all that day. I failed Ophelia when she was just a baby. I have made many mistakes, Maeva, therefore I am no one of importance. I have sworn my life to the Gods, to the realm. When...” He trailed off.

“When... what?” Mae demanded; her anger stole the air from her lungs.

“When your mother decided to leave and to take you with her, I was devastated. I thought I would never see you again. I chose then to help the ones I could. Swearing to myself to protect the Gods to my very best ability.”

“Listen, I don't know what happened between you and my mother, but you're clearly trusted here. So, I'm not sure what else you want to talk about. I figured you were done after the bridge.” She made to stand up and leave the library, but his words drew her back.

"I wanted to explain, Maeva." Turran looked at her, a deep sadness in his green eyes.

"It's Mae," she snapped. "My friends call me Mae," she said, regretting her anger. This was her father. The least she could do was give him a chance to talk. "If you're going to explain, I want to hear everything. Why am I so quick to anger? Why did I enjoy killing those soldiers? Why didn't anyone just kill me when I was born? Why am I now bound to Varanstalle?" Now that she had asked one question, she could feel a million more bubbling up inside of her. "Why did you abandon me?" she finished quietly, looking at Turran, she felt abandoned all over again. She was going to be alone. Always, so alone.

"It's a long story, but if you're willing to listen, I'm willing to tell it." He looked at her expectantly. She waved her hand, telling him to continue. He took a deep breath and began.

"When I passed away, I was met by the vengeful Goddess that the Lady once was. I swore myself to her to escape the fate that lay before me. I was born again, as a Daemon. I was assigned to the mortal realm. The expectation that we would ensure the Lady's worship was all-encompassing. She was spiraling you see, a young Goddess with no one to share the burden of judgment with.

The assignment was rather easy. Despite what the Lady thought, most mortals worshiped her. She was the only Goddess at that time, of course, but the people adored her. There was the standard; sacrifice your family cow, leave baskets of fruit and cheeses at her temples, but many mortals went beyond that. Naming their children after the moon, almost every daughter was Luna or Lune or some variation of, I believe there were even a few Moonas.

We were to remain in the mortal realm, not to return until our assignment was up and the next group of Daemons came to take over. At night we wandered, thirsting for human contact of our own, missing something from our previous life. Though our mortal lives were something of a blur. We remembered human contact. We watched as Our Lady received love and praise from the humans, and we craved that as well. Many of us did not know the right way to go about this, the darkness of our nature causing us to take what we wanted, regardless of how the human felt. I, however, wanted to feel something real again.

I met her underneath a cherry blossom tree, its tiny flowers in full bloom, glowing pink in the moonlight. She was weeping into her arms as I slowly made my way toward her.

‘Excuse me?’

‘Y...y...yes?’ she stuttered.

‘Are you alright?’ I asked her. She lifted her face out of her arms, her beauty struck through me. Her tanned skin glistening in the moonlight, her hazel eyes were what drew me in. I wanted to drown in them. Her blonde hair fell around her face, causing a silky curtain to come between us. I felt an overwhelming urge to take her into my arms.

‘I... I am... fine,’ she sniffed, wiping tears from her face. I sat down beside her, noticing as she recoiled from my presence, but she didn't flee.

‘You're not. Would you like to talk about it?’ I asked. She shook her head at me. We sat in silence for a while. I stared at the moon, watching her slow arc across the sky. Her sniffles and sobs finally quieted down.

‘Thank you.’ I heard a voice like a tinkling bell beside me.

‘Whatever for? I sat here,’ I pointed out

‘Exactly, thank you. For sitting with me.’ She smiled at me then. My whole world turned upside down. I never thought love at first sight was a real thing, but this... well maybe not love, but it was definitely lust. She was beautiful. She reached toward me, wrapping her arms around my neck in a warm embrace. Standing up, she gathered her skirts in her hands.

‘I must go,’ she said, looking around.

‘Will you be here again tomorrow?’

‘If that would please you,’ I replied. It didn't matter, she has trapped me with her beauty. I knew I would be there, anyway.

‘It would.’ She quickly hugged me again, and I watched her walk away, swishing her hips.” He paused for a moment, as if remembering that night. A smile played over his lips.

“We met for the next seven moons after that. She told me her name. *Lucille*. She told me her life; her husband was not exactly the most loving man. He was demanding an heir to their vast fortune. She was having a hard time getting pregnant. I listened to her every word, feeding off them. Falling further and further for her.

One night she met me under the cherry blossom tree. Her eyes were rimmed red. She had been crying. For how long? I do not know.

‘Lucille, what is it?’

‘Turran! I... I...’ she started sobbing, wrapping her arms around my neck. I lowered us onto the ground, she in my lap.

‘He... he is still demanding a baby. I don't want to give him one. I want to be with you!’ She buried her head in my shoulder. My heart soared.

‘Lucille, look at me please.’ I lifted her chin.

‘You are the most beautiful woman I have ever laid my eyes upon. I would be honored to love you. To hold you. To be like this forever.’ She stared at me, lust in her eyes. She bit her lip, pulling it into her mouth. I brought her toward me, kissing her, finally. It was everything I had hoped it would be. I could feel sparks exploding across my whole body. I slowly lowered us down all the way on the ground, chest to chest she lay on top of me. She was beautiful...”

“Spare me the details, *please*.” Mae made a gagging noise. Turran laughed.

“Fine.

Soon after, she found out she was pregnant. Unaware at the time what she was carrying inside of her.

‘Are you sure it is mine?’ I asked her

‘I am. He has not been around lately. We have not...’

‘I see. Well, what do you want to do?’

‘I don't know, Turran! I can't stay with you, you're a Daemon. Where would we go? We would be cast out of society. You are from the Afterworld! We can't stay there.’ I was so caught off guard, not even a few days ago, she was telling me that she loved me, that she wanted to be with me. Now? Now, she was telling me the complete opposite. She started crying then.

‘Lucille please,’ I begged.

‘I love you. I would rather be cast out of the Afterworld than lose you,’ she scoffed.

‘That is such a lie, Turran, do you think because I am pregnant, I am also stupid? It would never work. No. I am going to stay with him.’

‘Lucille!’ I cried as she turned on her heel. Marching away from me and out of my life forever. I slumped down under the tree. Completely defeated. I remained there for days. I finally retreated to the Afterworld, begging The Keeper to watch over you. Slowly I turned bitter toward love, vowing to never feel anything for another human or otherwise.

I heard through The Keeper that your mother claimed I tricked her, slept with her and left her to deal with the consequences. I pledged myself to the service of the Lady and the Prince then. Wanting someone to protect if I could not have someone to love. I am so sorry, Maeva, I was a stupid Daemon. I should have fought harder for you." Tears silently ran down his face. Mae knew that her face mirrored her father's.

"It's... it's really okay."

"It's not. I'm going to make it up to you."

"Dad, it's okay. You don't have to make anything up to me. Seriously. I'm a big girl and I grew up fine," Mae insisted.

"It's not the present I am talking about," Turran replied.

"Then what?"

"Varanstalle. Look, I know that half Daemon children who walk into the enchanted woods are doomed to wander Varanstalle. It is a punishment they must endure for their parents, for their lineage. The Lady was not pleased that her creatures were reproducing with humans, so she has sought to punish the offspring of that unholy union. However, to keep her Daemons from turning on her, she made the deal that they would only suffer that fate if they stumbled into Varanstalle by themselves. The woods call to you, to every Daemon child." Turran looked at her, apologies left unsaid in his eyes. Mae swallowed over the lump in her throat. She felt her anger wisp away to ash. He was just as hurt as she was. Maybe she could forgive him. Not right away - years of abandonment will do that to a person - but eventually. Maybe they could heal together.

"You brought The Goddesses of Shadow and Flame back to the Afterworld. That alone should pardon you from the hellish fate of Varanstalle. Even if it does not, I can see the love you have for The Goddess of Flame. I believe My Lady would give her long-lost daughter whatever she wanted," he sounded hopeful.

"I was told maybe love could save me..." Mae said.

"Listen kiddo, with me on your side, we've got nothing to lose."

"What are you saying?"

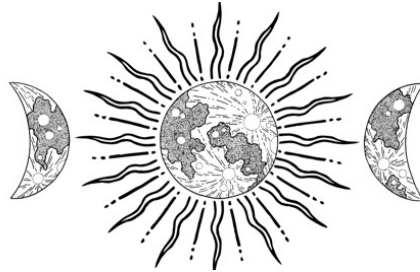
"I'm saying have faith, Mae."



Mae slowly walked back to her room. Hope swelled in her chest, ballooning until she felt like she was floating. Could she avoid Varanstalle? Could she be with Ophelia? She really wanted to.

She gently pushed the door open to her room; the fire was still roaring, casting flickering shadows around the room. Orion slept soundly. Ophelia lay sprawled on the bed, her arm over her face, her white hair snaked around her head, stark against the dark fur blankets she lay upon. She looked gorgeous, even with her mouth wide open in sleep. Mae stripped off her leather pants and her tunic. Exhaustion flowed through her bones. She climbed into the bed beside Ophelia. The Goddess turned toward her automatically. Mae's heart swelled as Ophelia wrapped her legs over her thighs, Ophelia's arm snaking across her stomach, sending butterflies through her. Mae stared into the room, finally drifting off to sleep, utterly in love with the girl lying beside her.

The Lady of Darkness



She strained her ears, in hope of catching any noise in the palace. It was eerily quiet. The only sounds were her breathing, slow and even, despite the feeling of dread that crept down her spine. She had been left alone for days, her only company the jangle of her chains.

She was still trying to puzzle out how Lucien had returned. She couldn't come up with any reasonable explanation, leaving only the unreasonable. This is what she feared the most: unreasonable left too much room, far too much room for impossible to become possible. This was worse than the fear she had felt when she first awoke. This clawed its way into her mind, making a home there.

Before long, she heard the click of boots on polished wood. Someone was coming to her prison. She heard the door open. Whoever was on the other side seemed to struggle slightly under its weight. The heavy door clicked shut, the footsteps came slowly toward her. They were measured, paced, whoever was there was savoring the moment.

"Would you get your gloating over Balo? I've got many plans today. Stare at the dirty cloth on my eyes, pull at my chains, shift uncomfortably," sarcasm oozed out of her mouth.

"Mother Moon," a child-like voice whispered through the room, sending an icy chill down her spine.

"Who are you?" she asked, desperately trying to see through the cloth that blinded her. Dread sat like a weight in her stomach. It flowed into her bones making her feel heavy and sluggish.

"I am only a child, a child who has lived through the worst nightmares," the whispers ebbed and flowed around her

"I am sorry child, but I don't know what I can do for you."

"You will pay!" the voice cut through her. She winced. She had had enough of the games.

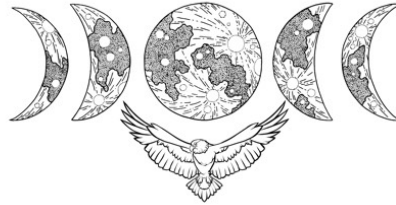
"Who. Are. You?" she asked again. She let the malice take over, her hair snaked toward the child. Suddenly, a flash of light blinded her. She squinted into the afternoon sun streaming through the window. She forgot her anger, and quickly reclaimed the calm facade of Mother Moon. Slowly, her eyes adjusted to the bright light that she had not seen in what felt like a millennium. Her lover's warmth washed over her, chasing the cold from her body. She heard rustling close to her. She turned toward the figure that had come through the door.

He was small in stature, his once luminous child skin rotted away at his hands. The nails that remained had been broken and bent back, as if the child had clawed his way out of something. His eyes, black bottomless pools, spilling forth an oily brackish substance. His lips were blue, like someone who had drowned...

It couldn't be. She thought to herself. She was hoping that Balo had lied about his return. The child standing in front of her could be no one else, though.

"Lucien," she spat.

Chapter Eighteen



The smell of cinnamon cakes led Mae down the hall. She stopped at another set of elegant double doors. Filigree twisting up and back down, creating intricate floral patterns on the wood. Her stomach rumbled as she reached for the handle, thankful her nose was a better navigator than her brain. She pulled the door outward and stepped into a cavernous room. Arched ceilings soared above her head; a glass dome ceiling stretched above her. The golden light spilled through, warming the dining hall. Elegant pillars twisted around themselves, black and gold marble that held the whole palace in place. The floor was an inky black, inlaid with white quartz to resemble stars.

A tapestry hung on the far wall. A deep blue, faded in and out of deep black clouds. The image of a full moon surrounded by a golden sun sat in the middle, the rays of the Sun stretching toward the top of the tapestry. The phases of the moon spanning beneath it. Flecks of silver and gold filled the rest of the tapestry, the illusion of constellations and planets, as if the whole universe were set out before her. It was beautiful.

“She made it herself,” the Prince said, his hands folded behind his back.

“It's stunning,” Mae whispered, reaching out to run her hands over the impeccable embroidery.

“She will slay me for telling you that she made this. She never wants to appear as anything other than The First Goddess. She wants to always be viewed as regal, not as some woman who toils away over needles and

thread. She told me she wanted something for our daughters to remember us by when we decided to step down from our duties. I believe the mortal realm calls it 'the golden years' where you've put in your time and now you just get to just enjoy existing.

It is something to remind them that there is no yin without yang, no birth without death, no peace without war. For when they rule, they will have to be fair and compassionate."

"They will be. They already are," Mae confirmed. She knew Ophelia would be the perfect Goddess to rule the Afterworld, with her sister at her side. She could picture them now, Ophelia with her beautiful smile, Róisín the voice of reason.

"They are darkness and light, two sides of the same coin," the Prince agreed. "Balanced, they will complete each other as the Goddesses of the Realm." He was interrupted as Mae's stomach took this inopportune moment to growl loudly, the sound echoing through the room. She gasped loudly, covering her stomach hoping to lessen the noise.

"Come, eat. We have much to talk about." He led Mae toward the long table, it was heaped with all kinds of food. Meats and cheeses, fruits, tiny cakes, the ones whose fragrance brought her here in the first place. She could see Ophelia and Róisín were already sitting at the table together, Kiel opposite of them. He was telling them a story waving his hands in the air for dramatic effect.

"Mae!" Kiel called brightly. "It's about time you joined us!" Mae snorted as she sat in the seat beside Kiel. She snatched a cinnamon cake and stuffed it into her mouth. The cinnamon warmed in her mouth, sweet and spicy. She sighed; the taste was heavenly.

"Theesee awre delwiciouss," she said while she chewed, crumbs falling out of her mouth. She proceeded to grab a plate and pile it high with food.

"Mae! Did no one teach you not to talk with your mouth full?" Ophelia asked, trying to look appalled. Ultimately failing, she fell to the side in a fit of giggles.

"Nah, Fletcher was too busy teaching me how to stay alive," she said, trying to be serious, which caused Ophelia to laugh harder.

"I should have words with him over this," Ophelia said, trying to match Mae's serious tone. Mae swallowed hard, smiling showing her teeth. She hadn't felt this light in a long time. She grabbed a piece of a

melon, biting into its soft orange flesh. She tasted the sweetness as it spread across her tongue. The juice ran down her chin.

"Three Eyes, Mae!" Ophelia said, unable to keep from smiling. "Were you raised in a barn?" Mae wiped her mouth with her sleeve, grinning again.

"Absolutely not, in fact, Lia, I was raised by The Cosmos himself, *your* grand-dad. So, maybe show me some admiration. I certainly deserve it." She winked. Ophelia leapt up from the table, smothering Mae in a hug.

"And here I thought I was the funny one of the group," Kiel said with a mock pout.

"Don't you worry, Kiel. You will *always* be more funny than Mae. In about two seconds, she's going to scowl." Ophelia laughed as Mae did exactly that.

"My dear Goddess," she said, popping another piece of melon in her mouth. "You love my scowls. Admit it."

"Oh yes, I love when your face is all pinched up like you smelled something horrible," Ophelia replied, another smile playing on her lips, her sunrise eyes sparkling. Mae felt her heart skip a beat. She smiled back.

She wanted nothing more than to remain in this moment for just a while longer. Was it too much to ask for them to remain happy and carefree for just a few more minutes? She watched Róisín and Kiel laughing and tossing grapes back and forth. Orion swooped down on them to snap up the fruit from midair causing Róisín to squeal in delight. Ophelia reached for her hand under the table, her slim fingers brushed Mae's knee, sending shocks through her body. She tangled their fingers together, rubbing her pinky finger along Ophelia's palm.

As if the Prince himself was reading her mind, he cleared his throat. They all turned to him, waiting to hear what he had to say.

"I hate to be the damper on such a wonderful morning, but there is so much that needs to be discussed," his deep baritone reverberated in the great dining hall, causing all the laughter to die down.

"We need to get mama back," Róisín said, slamming a tiny white fist into the table, toppling a tower of strawberries. The bright red fruit spilled onto the floor and rolled across the dining hall. The mood turned somber.

"Of course, we're going to get her back, Róisín." Ophelia soothed her sister, rubbing her shoulders. Mae could see the tiny Goddess physically relax, comforted by her sister, the fight going out of her.

“How?” she pouted, crossing her arms over her chest. “Balo isn’t going to let us just walk in there.”

“Actually,” the Prince said as he stood up, he took a piece of parchment out of his impeccable white jacket. Mae recognized the silver and red of Elecara. The leviathan stamped into the back. It's dragon-like head snarling, teeth long and pointy. Serpent like fins intertwined around its body. Claws tapered to sharp points. A beast to represent the monster king.

“That's from Elecara,” she said. Assuming everyone already knew but not being able to stop the words from coming out of her mouth.

“Yes, it is, I don't know what his game is but Balo has invited me to a Royal Ball.” He threw the invite onto the table. It spun almost right off the edge before Mae caught it.

You Are Cordially Invited.

Join us as we celebrate the Boy Prince Lucien's return!

A masquerade ball will be held at the palace in a fortnight.

All of Elecara is required to attend under threat of execution.

“By the Lady,” Mae whispered, her hand covering her mouth. Lucien was alive?

“Execution? Harsh,” Kiel said, leaning in over her shoulder to read.

“Lucien's return?” Ophelia asked, fear filling her voice. “How is that even possible?”

“I honestly do not have an answer for you. It is not something that has never been done before. I have been searching the library for days to no avail. There are no answers. The dead are supposed to be just that... Dead,” the Prince said, dismayed.

“Well, I think our next step is rather obvious,” Mae said.

“Party time!” Kiel shouted, earning him a smack in the back of the head. “Ow,” he cried out. His hand flew up to protect himself from further attacks.

“A fortnight... this was sent fourteen days ago. The ball is tonight,” Mae said, turning the invite over in her hands. She saw a date written there in elegant script, for two weeks prior.

“That is correct, we do not have a lot of time, so might I suggest you all get yourselves ready?” the Prince said as he stood up from the table.

“Oh... Yes, get in our finery to go to slaughter,” Mae said under her breath. She watched as The God left the dining hall, wondering just how she was going to pull this off.

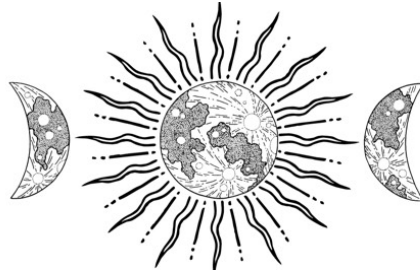


The plan itself was simple. It was as if Balo was laying out a path for them, complete with the excuse for disguises, to rescue the Lady of Darkness. A sickening feeling came over Mae. It was too easy. Walk in, find her, walk out.

Balo is up to something, she thought. *I just know it*. She listened as everyone seemed to get excited about the task ahead of them. Maybe not exactly the task of finding the Goddess and freeing her, but the party, the sneaking around, the dressing up. She, however, was thinking about the Goddess. Finally, everything would be set right. The Lady back in her rightful place, the moon returned to the sky.

Mae hoped it would be the happy ending they all deserved.

The Lady of Darkness



For the first time since Balo had brought her here, she was able to see the room she was in.

It was rounded, confirming that she was in a tower. Dim sunlight filtered down through small windows high up on the wall. Big enough for an archer to shoot through, but not at all possible for escape. The whole room was void of color. Gray and dull, as if it was designed to keep its occupant bored and pliant. Not even three feet from her was a bed.

How pleasant, she thought to herself. Her captors were very accommodating indeed. A voice interrupted her thoughts.

“Well, well, well My Lady. What a sight you are,” Lucien tsked.

“Lucien. You are a child, what are you doing?”

“A child forced to go through literal hell. I have seen things Mother Moon. I remember things. My parents, my sister, my kingdom never loving me. I felt the intense loneliness of being cast out from my family.” He slowly paced the room. His movements were jerky, as if he was thawing after being frozen, or a puppet.

“Do you want to know, *Mother Moon*, how I managed to come back from the personal hell you created for me?”

“Do I have a choice, child? I am chained here. I could just not listen, but what is the point you're going to tell me either way?”

“You really are a bitch, aren't you?” His voice rose a few octaves, sounding more feminine than it did when he was calm. He spat; wetness slapped her in the face. “But you are correct. I will tell you either way.

You see, my life was supposed to be one of grandeur. I was supposed to be loved. My mother was the one person who was supposed to love me unconditionally. Instead, she disciplined me. She did not love me. Who punishes someone they love? While my father showered me with love, she spent too much time with my bastard sister.”

“So, you are a spoiled brat. Why am I not surprised?”

“Would you shut the hell up!” Lucien shouted, his voice echoing around the room. He took a deep breath, then continued, “I wanted her out of my life, so I would be free to do as I pleased. When I pushed my mother, the stupid woman moved! I fell into the Hell Waters! I burned from the inside out. I could feel my body turn to ice, felt my heart stop beating. I woke up on the shore of Darkrael. Me! Not her, not how it was supposed to be! I spent the time there waiting, plotting, ultimately deciding I would not stay in this place. I would come back to the mortal realm. I would live.

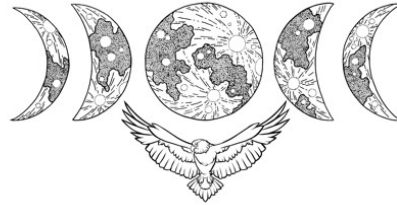
When I stood before you for judgment, you barely spared me a glance. Damning me to live out my days in a nightmare world. Every day, I watched as my mother and my father would love my sister, leaving me to fend for myself. Cold and lonely. I was forced to live over and over my greatest fear, that I would never rule Elecara. That this kingdom would not get the King it deserved. That I would never be adored as I should be.

I decided I would defeat my nightmares. I slayed my whole family, including my asshole father, for loving my sister and not me. I clawed my way out of your prison. I swam the Darkrael, feeling the water seep into me, becoming me. It is what fuels me now. No longer does blood run through these veins.”

She just stared at the boy before her, the child who she could only call a monster. Hell Water incarnate. She never thought she would see the day.

“I will kill The God of Light; I will kill your daughter. This kingdom will bow or burn. And you with it.” He left the room. As he did a cackling laugh filled her ears, threatening to drive her mad.

Chapter Nineteen



Mae sank beneath the warm water. Underneath the surface it was just her and her thoughts, the rest of the world muffled. Her mind drifted, not really thinking of anything in particular. The bath, if it could be considered a bath and not a small swimming pool, was carved from a solid piece of black quartz. Polished smooth to a mirror finish, if she opened her eyes while beneath the surface, she imagined she would look like a mermaid, or perhaps a sea witch.

Mae surfaced, running her hands through her wet tangled strands, feeling them snarl around her fingers. She made her way to the side of the tub. One of the Lady's maids in waiting had left an array of scented soaps. She lifted the first, taking a deep breath and gagging. Floral scents bombarded her nose. She sneezed trying to clear the smell. Picking up the next bar, she held it further from her nose before inhaling. The scent was much more subtle: vanilla and the slightest hint of sandalwood. She decided this was probably going to be as good as it gets and lathered the bar between her hands, running the luxurious bubbles through her hair, she felt the grit of sand, dried blood and the Lady only knows what else. She leaned her head back to rinse and lathered her hair again. She watched as something in the water churned and filtered out the grime from washing herself. Vanilla and sandalwood filled her senses, making her head swim. She sank back beneath the surface of the water. She thought about staying in her warm cocoon forever. Forget everything else and just be, but as hard as she tried her thoughts eventually drifted to the task ahead of them.

She couldn't fathom how Balo had managed to capture both Goddesses. She remembered the Prince of the Sun mentioning he thought that Balo had used blood to make a binding spell. Where did he learn to make a binding spell? Did he just have a sorceress at his disposal? Knowing the deranged man Balo had become it wouldn't surprise Mae in the slightest. She blew bubbles out of her mouth and rose back out of the water. The steam curled around her. She stepped out of the tub and walked to the full-length mirror on the other side of the room. She spun around and around to look at herself.

Mae had never thought of herself as stunningly attractive. She knew she was good looking, the number of women - and men, though she turned them down quickly, who bought her drinks at the tavern told her that. She always saw herself as more her Daemon side than her human side. When she was a child, she would wake from nightmares of herself with horns spiraling into the air. Her hair snaked around her, taking on a life of its own. It choked the essence out of anyone she encountered. Her green eyes were always replaced with blind, unseeing pupils. Her hands always tapered off to black, an oil-like substance dripping from her fingertips. She shook her head, banishing the nightmare as quickly as she remembered it.

She ran her hands over the curves of her breasts and down her hips she turned to admire her favorite part of her body, a beautiful rendition of Orion covered her entire back, his spine ran along her left side, his head in profile, his wings stretched across her back and brushed her other shoulder. His tail feathers ended halfway down her thigh. She slowly let her gaze wander over her own curves, eventually meeting her leaf green eyes in the glass. A flash filled the room, temporarily blinding her; once her vision cleared, standing in front of her was the image from her nightmares. She lifted a hand. The daemon in the mirror followed, oil black liquid dripping off her fingers.

Embrace me. A voice like rocks scraping against each other, hoarse and dry, reached her ears. Mae yelped, a cry strangling her. Fear raced through her blood, turning it to ice. She stumbled backward, her knee hit the edge of the tub, she felt herself fall to the marble floor, every part of her ached. She turned back to the glass, panic rising as she stared. However, just as quickly as her nightmare appeared, it disappeared again. Mae's breath came quickly and heavily. She thought to herself

I must really need some more sleep. She picked herself up off the floor, shivering in the nude. Orion hopped over to her, a silk robe gently held in his beak.

“Thank you, friend,” she whispered as tears came to her eyes. She buried her head in Orion’s neck, letting her fears wash over her. She cried until there was nothing left, until she was empty and void.



Mae padded back into the bedchamber, after her tears had dried, leaving salt on her cheeks. She wrung out her black curls, hearing the *drip, drip*, of the water hitting the floor.

“I smell like a cake,” she said to the room, crinkling her nose in annoyance. She lay down on the bed, reveling in the softness of the fur blankets. She rolled onto her side, staring into the fire. The light flickered around the room, the heat pressed against her, warming her. She lay there, not moving, just watching the flames dance in the hearth, losing track of time; she knew she had to start getting ready. The carriage would be along before sundown to transport them back to the mortal realm. Her eyes started to close,

Just a small nap. A knock came at the door.

“Or not.” Mae got up and made her way across the room. “What is everyone’s fucking obsession with knocking on my door when I’m trying to sleep?” she grumbled, swinging open the wooden door.

“Lia!” she gasped, tying the silk robe around her waist. “I’m sorry! I thought it was... well quite literally anyone else.” Ophelia giggled.

“They brought this to my room,” Ophelia said, showing Mae a beautiful gown.

“Well, you’re going to look beautiful in that aren’t you?” Mae said. “I mean you could pull off a potato sack, but this... this is just... wow,” she finished looking up at Ophelia, who licked her lips, not at all trying to hide the lust behind her eyes.

“It’s not for me. It’s for you,” she replied, her voice breathy and low.

“Me? What am I going to do with something like that? Where am I going to hide a dagger? My sword? It doesn’t even have pockets!” Mae held up her hand to protest. “I was just going to wear that.” She pointed to a heap of clothing on the floor.

“That.” Ophelia stared at the pile. “Is dirty and blood-stained, besides this is a *ball*, not a night out at the tavern. Come on, I'll help you get ready.” She grabbed Mae's hand, drawing her in. She kissed her lightly, nibbling at her bottom lip. Mae let Ophelia lead her across the hall, in a trance the whole time.



The room across from hers was every bit Ophelia. A lush white carpet spanned the entire room. Mae was glad she had bathed before coming over here. Light curtains ruffled in the breeze that came through the glass doors that led out to a balcony. The view was breathtaking. Overlooking the Afterworld's market, Mae could see the sparkling waters of Nyneve Cove beyond that. Ophelia came up behind her, snaking her arms around her waist. She rested her chin on Mae's shoulder.

“I could get used to this,” she whispered in Mae's ear, her breath tickling, setting Mae on fire.

“You'll have plenty of time to adjust to the view after all of this is said and done,” Mae said seriously. “We really should be getting ready.”

“We've got time.” Ophelia spun Mae around, tipping her chin up with one finger. “And I like this view a little more.” Ophelia bit her bottom lip, pulling it into her mouth. Mae couldn't remember what she was just talking about, her senses completely overloaded by the Goddess standing in front of her. She felt as Ophelia's hands roamed over her curves, leaving heat in their wake. Mae's entire body felt aflame. She felt Ophelia's fingers grab at the tie holding her robe together. In a fluid motion she untied the sash. Mae felt the cool silk slide off her body, vaguely aware as it puddled at her feet.

“Lia,” she breathed. “We really should...” Her thought cut off as Ophelia lifted her off the floor. Mae wrapped her legs around Ophelia's waist, her breath caught in her chest. Their mouths crashed together. Ophelia bit her bottom lip, causing Mae to gasp. They backed toward the bed. Ophelia lay Mae down underneath her. There was a vulnerability to Mae. She had never been nude with someone who was still fully clothed. It made her nervous, but Ophelia made her feel safe.

The Goddess had Mae's arm pinned above her head as she trailed kisses down her neck, tracing her collarbone. Lightning crackled along

Mae's body. She felt as Ophelia's hands slid further down her arms as she kissed lower, stopping to take Mae's breast in her mouth, swirling her tongue around. Despite herself Mae whimpered. No one had made her feel this way before, she was always giving more than she received. Ophelia flicked and sucked her, Mae bucking slightly beneath her. She crawled back up and kissed Mae hard, passionate, her tongue poking into Mae's mouth. Mae parted her lips, allowing Ophelia to deepen the kiss. She felt the Goddess' hands wandering. They caressed her curves, drifting closer to her core. Mae was on fire, her arms now free, she wrapped them around Ophelia's neck, she tangled her hands in her white hair, pulling her closer.

"Please Lia," she begged. "I need you."

That was all Ophelia needed. She lifted Mae up so that she was on the edge of the bed. She started again, trailing white hot kisses down Mae's body. Mae could feel herself getting slick as Ophelia made her way further down. She got down on her knees, Mae prayed as Ophelia kissed a slow, agonizing trail up her thighs. She felt like Ophelia could breathe and she would be over the edge. As if reading her mind Ophelia did just that. She let out a slow breath, driving Mae into a frenzy.

"What do you want, Mae?" Ophelia asked playfully.

"I think you fucking know what I want Lia!" Mae said between ragged breaths.

"Tell me," she replied, nibbling the inside of Mae's thigh.

"You," Mae moaned.

"As you wish," Ophelia said, finally closing her mouth over Mae. She twirled her tongue in and out, flicking it on her sensitive nub. Mae arched her back off the bed, panting,

"Please," she whispered. Ophelia slid her hands up Mae's thighs, teasing her with her fingers. She pushed them inside of her. Mae moaned in pleasure, her eyes rolling back in her head. Ophelia pumped her fingers faster, swirling her tongue around. Mae propped herself up on her elbows, shoving her hands into Ophelia's hair. Her head fell back, her moans got louder, her breathing harder. She felt the fire in her belly first, it spread throughout her body quickly. Ophelia was relentless, her hands and tongue pleasing Mae in a way she had never felt before. Mae's muscles coiled as she climaxed, shudders wracked her body.

"Oh, my Goddess, Ophelia!" she moaned. Ophelia pulled her down off the bed, so Mae was sitting on top of her. She kissed her while her body

shook, her moans gradually turned to whimpers. They sat on the floor, clinging to each other for long moments. Mae felt the sweat dry on her body, causing goose-flesh to rise along her arms and legs. Ophelia untangled herself, leaving Mae sitting on the floor. The goddess' absence left her feeling incomplete. In slow motion, she watched Ophelia cross the room and pick up her forgotten robe. She brought it back over and wrapped it around Mae.

“So, we should probably get ready now,” Ophelia whispered.

“You... you're, you're joking, right?” Mae asked, her eyes wide.

“No, I'm not. We have a party to attend, and I'm going to help you get ready. You really are hopeless with that stuff.” Ophelia laughed, offering Mae her hand. Mae took it. Standing up she slipped her arms back around Ophelia's neck. Rising on her toes she whispered in her ear.

“When this is all over, I'm going to worship you. You are my fire, my inferno.”



“What *are* you doing?” Mae gasped as Ophelia shoved another pin into her head.

“Your hair is a wild animal, Mae!” Ophelia laughed, as Mae scrunched up her nose and stuck her tongue out.

“It's fine. It gives me character,” Mae said, reaching up to run her fingers through her silky black curls. Ophelia smacked her hand away, pinning another curl in place, pulling it out of Mae's face. Mae looked in the mirror that she was in front of, watching the girl who she loved as she flitted about, pinning and poking at her head.

Ophelia had already piled her own hair into an elaborate braided style, ending in a low bun at the nape of her neck. She had woven a chain of silver moons and golden suns through the braid, adding to her ethereal beauty. The gown she had on was a dusty rose pink, fading up to silver. A structured bodice with a sweetheart neckline accentuated her shoulders. The back laced up with tiny pink pearl accents. The skirt fanned out in waves of silk and tulle, brushing along the ground. She had on a pair of dusty pink slippers.

“Easier to walk in,” she had said earlier, choosing comfort.

“Alright, this is the best I can do,” Ophelia said, throwing her hands in the air. “Time to get dressed.” Mae stared at the woman in the mirror. She didn't even recognize herself. Ophelia had managed an intricate braid design that pulled her curls out of her face, leaving the bottom half of her hair loose. Nothing adorned her hair, all the better. She didn't need to lose something of worth while trying to rescue someone. Ophelia brought over the gown she had shown Mae earlier.

“Just hang on,” Mae said, as she slipped back across the hall, grabbing her daggers from her room. She strapped one to each of her thighs and strutted back across the hall while trying to decide where to put the third one.

“Can you just put the dress on, then you can find a place for your stabby friends?” Ophelia said as she helped Mae step into the skirt, the bottom of it a deep midnight blue that faded up to black. Fortunately, Mae noted, the skirt didn't flounce out around her, silk like water rippling over her legs. A long slit from floor to mid-thigh provided a lot of movement. Ophelia helped Mae pull up the black bodice and laced the back. The front of the gown plunged down to her belly button, not leaving much to the imagination. Two flaps of fabric fell at her sides.

“What are these?” she asked, picking up the pieces. “Do I tie them?”

“You really are hopeless in formal wear, aren't you? Don't worry, it's quite adorable. They're sleeves Mae.” Ophelia laughed, holding one out so Mae could push her arm through. They fell off her shoulders, puffing around her arms. “I told you, you would find a place for your friends,” Ophelia said. Mae smiled as she tucked her black eagle dagger up her left sleeve. Ophelia brought over a pair of black silk slippers.

“But my boots!” Mae whined.

“Absolutely not!” Ophelia chided.

“These are going to be useless,” Mae said under her breath. Ophelia smiled again and led her over to the full-length mirror. Mae stepped in front of it with eyes closed. Taking a deep breath, she opened them. The person standing in front of her was nothing short of a woman. Mae had never seen herself look the way that she did. Her hair had been styled to accentuate her face. The dress hugged her curves and hid her daggers. The shoes, well, the shoes left something to be desired. Ophelia stepped behind her, lacing their fingers together.

“You are beautiful,” she whispered to Mae. Mae turned around, so they were facing each other.

“And you are stunning, as beautiful as the night sky.” She brought Ophelia's face down to hers, gently kissing her.

“I love you, Maeva,” Ophelia sighed against her mouth. Mae pulled back slightly, looking into Ophelia's eyes.

“I love you, Ophelia,” she said as she closed the distance between their mouths again.

“Party time!” Kiel burst through the door interrupting the girls. “Oh. My bad,” he said, smiling. His pale blonde waves had been swept back, making his face look fiercer. He had an elegant black coat and slacks on, accented with red. Róisín came into the room behind him, dressed in a deep emerald green that set off her marble white skin and flame red hair.

“Kiel! You have to knock. You can't just barge into every door you see.” She clucked her tongue.

“Little late now,” Mae said, laughing.

“Well, the carriage is here. We should get going,” Róisín said, grabbing Mae's arm and leading her out to the hallway.



The God of Light waited for them at the gate of the palace. He was dressed in gold and brushed bronze; his chest plate had the same moon and sun design as the tapestry that hung in the dining hall. His long blonde waves pulled away from his face, fastened with leather cord. He kept his hands bare, his gold fingertips drumming on his crossed arms as he waited. He was an opposing figure. Mae had to tip her head back as she stepped up to him. She could see why he was the Prince of the Sun. He radiated light from every pore. She bowed low to the Prince.

“Stand child,” he spoke. “There is no need for formalities. I am forever grateful for you returning my girls to me.” Mae nodded and rose. She took in the scene around her. The carriage stood off to the side. It looked like it was carved from a giant pearl. The white exterior swirled with pinks, blues and purples shifting across the smooth surface, reflecting the golden light of the Afterworld. The bulbous body was rounded on each end, almost making the carriage a globe. It was nothing short of a fairytale ride if she had ever seen one. She hadn't, but she imagined this is what princesses in

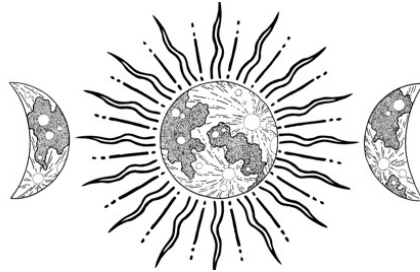
stories would travel in. Small windows were cut out along the walls, also in a round shape, gauzy white curtains hung over them, providing privacy to the occupants.

Pegasys pulled the carriage, six of them matching the pinks and purples of the carriage, and the seventh, Eluna sat ahead of them, in the lead, her ashy blue mane glowing in the afternoon light. Mae offered her hand to Ophelia, helping her into the carriage. She began to climb the small steps, when a hand shot out to help her from tripping over her gown.

“Thanks Kiel,” she said grateful for the help. Mae sat down on a plush bench, sinking into the black satin fabric. Butterflies were battling in her stomach as she felt the carriage lurch forward.

Well, now or never. She thought.

The Lady of Darkness



“Can you believe it, Lydia?”

“I know! Tonight.”

“Dancing, drinking, finally some good food!”

“Garrett's hands finding their way up my skirt.”

“Lydia!”

“Fine, hooray dancing.”

“Thank you!”

“You need someone up your skirt.”

“Shut up! It's just so exciting. The palace hasn't had a party in ages.”

That drip was less annoying than these two. She thought to herself.

How can I hear them, anyway? I'm in a tower! Do they sit outside the door? Do they know I'm here? Did Balo send them up here as my own form of torture? Are my ears that good that I am doomed to suffer this incessant prattling?

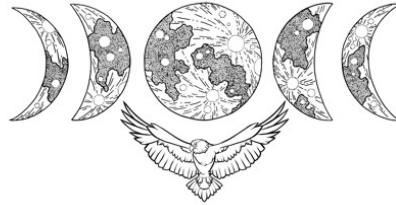
She sighed to herself, jangling her chains as she readjusted her position. She pulled hard, feeling the stone give way slightly under her strength. It was supposed to be the full moon soon, the time when she was at her strongest. Although she was missing from the sky, she could feel the power buzzing beneath her skin.

“Ahh! You look so gorgeous! He's going to swoon!”

“It really is true, isn't it? Don't come back tonight sweetie, I plan on making this bed rock till the sun comes up.”

Oh goodie, something to look forward to. She rolled her eyes, melting the skin on her arms again, and feeling the stone move as she pulled.
Soon.

Chapter Twenty



Mae stared out the carriage window, her stomach turned to knots. She couldn't decide if she was nervous or ready to stab something. All she knew for sure was that tonight, or tomorrow, would be the end of this whole ordeal. Then maybe she could get some sleep. She watched the rolling hills pass by the greens blurring together made her dizzy; she turned her eyes toward the sky. Orion flew above them, in and out of sight. He swooped and spun in delight. Mae was glad he was having fun.

Inside the carriage, no one made a sound; Róisín sat beside Kiel, who had his arm around her shoulder like a protective big brother. Róisín stared at the floor, her hands twisted in her dress, wrinkling the crushed velvet. The Prince sat stoic, staring out a window. Mae wasn't even sure she could see his chest rise or fall. She wondered if Gods needed to breathe. He was a statue, polished gold and bronze. Ophelia fidgeted beside her, crossing and uncrossing her ankles. She wrung her hands, sliding them down the tulle of her dress. Mae put her hand over Ophelia's, lacing their fingers together. She rubbed her thumb over the back of Ophelia's hand, feeling the tension flow out of her.

They sat in silence for a while longer, unsure of what to say to each other. Mae watched out the window as they slowly rolled toward a mountain, the gray rock face at odds with the soft green of the surrounding hills. The carriage came to a stop. The Prince hopped out and made his way to the driver.

“Who is driving this thing, anyway?” Kiel asked, his voice booming in the silence.

“Eluna, who else would be?” Róisín replied, her voice shaking as she tried to joke.

“Ah yes, how could I forget the two headed flying horse thing?” Kiel furrowed his brow.

“She knows where she is going,” Róisín said, the tension around her easing as she tried to hold back a laugh. “Turran is driving, goodness do you really think we would let a two headed pegasys lead us? Eluna can barely agree with herself.”

“Oh, you got me good Ró,” Kiel deadpanned ruffling her hair. She laughed and slapped his hands away. “Why have we stopped, anyway?” he asked, changing the subject and voicing the same concern Mae had.

“Oh, papa is opening the gate to the Afterworld,” Róisín said matter-of-factly.

“The gate to the Afterworld? Isn't that the river?” Mae questioned.

“No, that's for souls, and I suppose people who are trying to sneak in. We have a gate for when we have to visit the mortal realm,” Róisín said, flatly as if this was obvious.

“A gate? A gate! There's a front door? You mean we could have just waltzed through this gate instead of going over the bridge? You made us sneak through the side door like naughty teenagers! What the fuck Ró?” Kiel stared at her, his eyes the size of saucers.

“I didn't *make* you do anything. This gate doesn't let humans in without an escort provided by mama or papa. I can't even leave the realm by myself,” she huffed puffing her cheeks out. Her bi-colored eyes flashing with annoyance.

“Unbelievable,” Kiel said, laughing finally. A few moments later, the Prince returned to the carriage, and they lurched forward again. Mae watched as the mountain swallowed them, leaving them in the shadows as they passed through the gate to the mortal realm. She thought she would feel different as they passed from one place to another, but she just felt uneasy about the task ahead.

She could see Elecara far in the distance, glowing silver in the fading sun. Her heart ached for her home; she grew up on those streets. She knew though, that she would never be able to return to life as it was before this whole adventure.

“We should really figure out what our plan of attack is,” the Prince said, breaking Mae from her trance.

“Sure, I mean, what's there to really discuss? I have daggers and fists. Kiel can take my sword. The scabbard will make it look more like a prop than the deadly weapon it is,” Mae said, pointing at the sword that was leaning against the bench beside her. The scabbard was a cheery green, inlaid with tiger's eye and onyx gemstones. It looked utterly ridiculous, more like a child's toy than the deadly weapon it was inside. Leave it to her mortal father to find the gaudiest looking thing to house her sword. One of the only gifts he ever gave her.

One I plan to replace as soon as possible.

“That is certainly... well it's something.” The God eyed the scabbard, trying to hold in a laugh. Mae glared at him, but decided to hold her tongue. The last thing she needed was a God who was angry with her.

“Do any of you know how to get through the palace?” he asked. Mae's eyes flitted to Ophelia. The Prince followed her gaze. “I can only assume Balo is keeping your mother in one of two places, deep underground in the dungeons, like he did with you at the Manor house Róisín, or the tallest tower like some sick fairytale.” The God leveled his eyes at his daughter. She turned her eyes away from him hiding behind her white hair. Everyone in the carriage waited for Ophelia to explain the palace to them.

“I try not to remember that place. It was my own personal living hell,” she said quietly. She took a deep breath, closing her eyes to center herself before continuing. “But we will probably go in through the West entrance. It is the closest to the ballroom. The tower in question would be at the end of the north corridor off the ballroom, the dungeons to the south.

As for soldiers, I can only assume Balo will have them stationed throughout the party. They'll be watching the ball like hawks. We will have to slip through unnoticed. Hopefully, it's easier to do than talk about.” Mae noticed that Ophelia said Balo and not 'father', she realized that in some small way Ophelia had accepted her family.

“It may be best to split up. Róisín and Ophelia should come with me to the dungeons, and Mae you and Kiel can go to the tower,” the Prince declared, authority boomed in his voice, causing the windows in the carriage to rattle.

“Absolutely not!” Mae protested. Kiel nodded vehemently in agreement with her.

“Sir,” Ophelia said, as she reached across the space between the benches, placing a hand on the Prince's knee. “Father,” she whispered. The word sounded rough; she wasn't used to calling anyone that. “I know you are trying to protect me, but Mae and Kiel are also my family. The three of us have watched over each other for years. I would like to stay with them, please.” She looked scared. Her entire life had been in hiding. Her supposed blood family hated her and denied her every wish. The Prince's eyes softened.

“If that is what you want, Ophelia,” he said solemnly. Her eyes lit up with surprise. She smiled at her father.

“Thank you.”

“There is no need to thank me Ophelia, you are my daughter and I hope you can accept myself and your mother as you do these two one day,” his voice was warm like warm honey, Mae could see that he wanted Ophelia to feel safe with him.

“And me!” Róisín pouted, her pale skin turned pink on the apples of her cheeks.

“Oh Ró,” Ophelia cooed. “From the moment we met I felt our connection. Like you said our souls called to each other that night.” She smiled at her sister; Róisín's black and gold eyes sparkled with unshed tears as she flew across the carriage to hug Ophelia. Mae watched the two sisters embrace; it warmed her heart to see Ophelia accepted. She hoped after this she would still be alive after tonight to see the two Goddesses grow closer; she would find a way to stay.

“Well, it is settled then, Róisín you will come with me. Mae, I am counting on you to keep my daughter safe.” He stared right through her, pinning her to the bench of the carriage.

“Perhaps I will be the one keeping her safe,” Ophelia shot back, causing Mae to bark with laughter. Ophelia turned to her, mock hurt on her face. She leaned in and pecked Mae on the cheek. Mae stared forward wide eyed, not wanting to incur the wrath of The God of the Sun. She knew he was grateful that she had helped bring his daughters back. She just wasn't so sure he would be pleased she was in love with one of them.

“I see you make my daughter happy. Keep each other safe, then.” They all fell into an easy silence as they waited, anticipating what was to come next. The sun slowly sank lower toward the horizon as they approached the

border of Elecara. They stopped again; Mae could hear the muffled voice of Turran speaking with someone. Long minutes ticked by.

“What do you think is taking so long?” Róisín asked. Mae peeked through the window. She saw two soldiers walking around the pegasys, staring at them in awe as they pet them, scrambling to find sugar cubes.

“You're fucking joking, right?” Mae asked, incredulous. “They are amazed by the pegasys! The soldiers are just standing around petting them.”

“Well, I mean they are pretty amazing creatures,” Kiel said, as he shrugged his shoulders. Mae stood up, making her way toward the door. The Prince grabbed her arm as she reached for the handle.

“Maeva, they know who you are. None of you have your masks on yet. Do you want this to be over before it starts? Let them fawn over the animals. We will be on our way shortly.” Mae could hear the soldiers outside the carriage.

“Oh, aren't you just the sweetest thing?” one said, his voice a high falsetto as he cooed at the animal.

“Here baby, you want some sugar,” the other said.

“Can I ride her?” the first asked, his high voice went even higher.

“I would have to advise you; it would not be a good idea.” Turran stated his gruff baritone made it clear this wasn't a good idea.

“Come on! Please,” the first soldier begged. Mae could hear the stomp of a boot on the ground and pictured the soldier pouting like a small child.

“Gentlemen, while I can appreciate that you think these animals are precious and awe-inspiring, which they are. They are animals of the Afterworld, not some run-of-the-mill horse you find in the pasture,” Turran said to them, a finality in his tone. The soldiers did not give up, though.

“Hey, I don't know if you know who you're dealing with, but we don't have to let you pass through,” the second soldier said, he was harsh where his partner was soft. “We could just rough you up and leave you to the coyotes.”

“That really wouldn't be in your best interest,” Turran sneered. The Prince sighed. Rolling his body forward he made a fist and rapped it twice on the wall. Turran let out a low short whistle in reply.

“Well, it appears today is your lucky day, boys. The Great God of the Sun has given his blessing.” Mae felt the carriage rock as Turran got down.

“No way!” A high-pitched squeal reached Mae’s ears. “Awesome! I want that one!” Mae and Kiel rushed to the windows on the other side of the carriage, ripping back the curtains. Mae heard the *plink* of the metal rings hitting the floor, ignoring it for the far more interesting noise outside. Huddled side by side, they watched as Turran took the harness off one of the light purple pegasys. He handed the reins to the taller of the two soldiers. He then made his way over to Eluna, slipping the harness over her heads. She grunted, chewing around her bit, trying to fluff out her scaly wings.

“Oh, she's not going to like this,” Róisín said, she still sat, not concerned that someone was going to ride her pegasys.

“Here you go. Treat this one with respect,” Turran said, dropping the reins in the other soldier's open hand.

“Yeah sure, like I've never ridden a horse before,” the soldier replied sarcastically and smacked Eluna's hindquarters. Mae watched as he climbed onto the pegasys’ back, trying to settle between her wings. He seemed to be having a hard time getting comfortable, twisting every which way before finally settling. Eluna stamped at the ground, growing more impatient by the second. Mae heard the snap of the reins. Eluna whinnied loudly as she shot from the ground.

“She's not a horse, she's a pegasys, and you're doomed,” Turran said quietly as he dragged his boots across the ground while he walked back to the carriage. He knocked on the door, opening it. “Are you going to watch... or?” He looked at the Prince. Mae watched a silent conversation passing between them.

“Oh no, I'll just wait here,” the God replied, propping his feet up on the bench. He examined his nails, looking utterly bored with the whole situation. Mae looked between the two otherworldly creatures. “You are free to stretch your legs if you like,” the Prince said to the group, waving his hand toward the door. Mae was confused by the turn of events. “Róisín, I would prefer you stay inside.” Róisín nodded and sat down beside her father.

“Why are you not concerned that they took the pegasys? Couldn’t those soldiers fly off with them?” Mae asked, suspicious of why The God didn’t seem concerned with their predicament.

“Why don’t you just go stretch your legs? We’re still a ways off from the palace, and sitting this long is probably making you sore,” the Prince

replied, not bothering to answer Mae's question. She couldn't shake the confusion caused by the whole situation. She rolled her eyes as she moved to leave.

Mae, Kiel, and Ophelia stepped out of the carriage. Mae raised her arms above her head, feeling the muscles loosen after sitting in the carriage for so long. It felt good to stretch. She bent down to check her daggers were still attached to her thighs. Both were strapped tightly. She felt the third dagger she had slipped up her sleeve, offering her comfort. She looked at her surroundings. They were in a densely wooded area. Elecara still sat off in the distance, however it was much closer than it had been before. If she had to guess she thought, they would be near the Easternmost border of the Kingdom where the forest was the thickest. She was thinking about how much longer it would be until they were at the palace when she heard an ear-splitting scream.

Mae snapped her neck up to see Eluna diving toward the Earth, spinning in a tight circle. She let out a neigh as she bucked the soldier on her back into the air. He flew off, his limbs flopped like a rag-doll. One of her heads snapped at the soldier, taking his arm off at the shoulder. Blood spurt from the wound and the man's screams turned from ones of terror to agonizing pain. Eluna tossed the man's arm from her mouth and dove after him as he plunged toward the ground. She lunged at his head; Mae could hear the snap of his neck as it abruptly cut off his screams. She couldn't tear her eyes from the scene. Eluna flung the rest of his body toward the earth before slowly descending to the ground.

Eluna landed with a thump beside Turran. She rustled her wings and prodded at the dirt. The body of the soldier landed in a crumpled heap beside her; blood slowly oozed out of his wounds, sinking into the hard packed dirt of the path. Eluna dug her hoof into the soldier's face, his eye left the socket with a wet pop. Eluna scooped the eye off the ground with her tongue.

"I told you she wasn't going to like this," Róisín said from the door of the carriage. She came out and stood beside them as they listened to the sounds of Eluna chewing the soldier's eye. The sound was unlike anything Mae had ever heard, a wet sort of crunch. She felt her stomach do a flip as she tried to keep down the contents of her previous meals.

"What. The. Fuck?" Kiel hissed through his teeth.

"It's her favorite treat," Róisín said, scratching Eluna in the spot where her two necks met her body.

"Eyes?" Kiel asked, gaping like a fish as Róisín nodded her head, confirming that eyes were, in fact, the pegasys' favorite treat.

"I told them pegasys are an animal of the Afterworld, not some common horse and to respect her," Turran stated plainly. He stalked off to the driver's seat and sat down. He turned his eyes to the sky again. Before long, the taller soldier landed on the ground with a dull thud, his body twisted beyond recognition. The other pegasys landed silently.

"Well, shall we get these two hooked back up and be on our way?" Mae stared at Turran wide eyed.

"I... hrgh. Oh. okay." She grabbed Ophelia around the waist, her eyes glued to the two men who lay twisted on the ground. Mae steered her back toward the carriage. If she was having a hard time with this, she could only imagine her friends were on the verge of collapse. Once Ophelia and Kiel were settled inside, Mae stomped back over to her father.

"What in the actual fuck was that Turran?" she shouted. Her heart threatened to pound out of her chest, her vision red with anger.

"Maeva, you best remember that although *you* have seen nothing but hospitality in the Afterworld, it is not the same for many people. Where there is paradise, there is also a living hell. You'd be wise to heed my words. Respect the Afterworld and the Afterworld will respect you," he replied quietly as he hooked the pegasyses up.

"It's not *me* I'm concerned about, *dad*. Why would you let Ophelia out of that carriage when it's clear you had a good idea what was going to happen?" She kicked out at a rock. It flew through the air and embedded itself in a tree. She couldn't control her anger.

"She will have to learn the truth, eventually; you cannot keep her from that forever," Turran said calmly, like he was speaking to a child.

"The truth? What truth? That the head of The Gods' guard is an insensitive prick?" Mae spat at him. She couldn't believe he was just standing there, acting like it wasn't a big deal.

"Watch your language young lady!" Turran marched over to her, blocking the sun with his height. She got up in his face, she stabbed a finger into his chest.

"Oh, back off Turran, we just met. You don't get to act all parental toward me." She spun back toward the carriage; as she stepped away,

Turran put a hand on her shoulder. She smacked it away and tried to stomp away. A sympathetic voice stopped her.

"I'm sorry, Maeva, I am. I know I was never there, so acting like you need a parent isn't going to work for you. I am sorry that Ophelia had to see that, but she will have to learn that the Afterworld is not always a happy place." He stared at her, his green eyes piercing her, reminding her that they were family.

"Be that as it may, I was hoping to spare her a little longer. Ease her into it," Mae said quietly. The anger raced from her body, it left her feeling empty.

"She's already seen death; did she not kill a man while fleeing the mortal realm? She is strong, Mae. Stand beside her, not in front of her." Turran jumped back up into the driver's seat, his back to her, cutting off the conversation. Mae sighed and climbed back into the carriage. Kiel was sitting back beside Róisín, she was telling him an animated story to keep him from dwelling on what he just saw. Ophelia was staring at the floor, eyes hard. Looking determined.

"Lia..." Mae started as she sat beside her. Ophelia turned, her face drawn. She looked older and ageless.

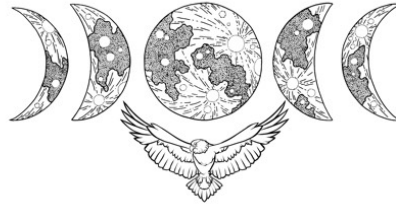
"It'll be alright," Lia said.

"How?" Mae asked.

"It has to be," Ophelia finished. Mae thought back to the conversation they had at The Trader's Porch. Turran was right. Ophelia was strong, and getting stronger by the moment.

Time to stand beside her, not in front of her.

Chapter Twenty-one



There weren't any more interruptions as they traveled through the village to the palace. They passed Mae's cottage. She looked wistfully out the window. The little house sat nestled into a hill. It was unremarkable. Most people would just walk by without a second glance. Just how she liked it. This was her home.

"Did you want to stop?" the Prince asked, surprising her. She nodded quickly, ecstatic that he had thought of her.

"That'd be great, actually." They pulled up slowly. Mae disembarked, looking at her humble little cottage. She had spent so much time here over the years. She whistled. Orion swooped down and sat on her shoulder. She considered sneaking around, but noticed that the kingdom was very quiet. She assumed everyone was already at or on their way to the ball. She pushed the front door open, peering through the dust that had settled.

I've been gone for what five days? Why does it look like I've been gone for five years? She made her way to the bedchamber, tripping over clothing on the floor. *That's probably why. Things aren't clean.* She grabbed a pair of boots off the floor, kicking off the satin slippers Ophelia provided her.

"Much better," she said to Orion, he chirped disapprovingly. "Listen, something is going down tonight and I'm not going to be slowed down by a pair of slippers." Orion made a noise that sounded suspiciously like mocking her. "Whatever," she said, smiling as she laced her boots up. The supple black leather was soft against her skin, the boot top ended just

under her knee, offering more protection than the dainty slippers that she left on the floor. Standing, she turned in place, committing her home to memory. Mae wasn't sure how the night was going to end, but she was certain she wouldn't be returning to this place anytime soon, if ever. She ran her hand over the rough stone of the hearth, remembering all the times that she, Ophelia and Kiel had sat in the warmth of the fire, drinking or laughing or just being in one another's company. Her heart ached for what her life once was. Whatever happened tonight things had changed. She gestured in the air, and Orion perched on her shoulder once again.

"Well, old friend, are you ready?" Orion buried his beak in her hair, gently pecking at her neck. "Yeah, I love you too, you silly beast," she said, affectionately patting Orion, she scratched him under his neck. Mae gently closed the door to her cottage, turning the lock and not looking back.

"Mae?" Ophelia said her name as she silently climbed back into the carriage. "Are you alright?"

"Of course I am. I'm ready to get this over with," she declared.

"Did you put *boots* on?" Kiel asked loudly, drawing the attention of everyone in the carriage.

"Three Eyes, Kiel, can't you ever keep your mouth shut?" Mae scolded. She tried to hide her boots with her skirt.

"Mae! Can't you ever just dress up?" Ophelia asked. "Seriously. I can't take you anywhere!" She laughed and scooted across the bench, sitting close. Mae breathed in deep, smelling the citrus scents of whichever soaps Ophelia used earlier while getting ready. She wished she could stop time here, knowing that she couldn't, instead she tried to enjoy the few minutes of peace she had left with her friends.

Turran snapped the reins, and the carriage moved forward, closer and closer to the palace. Closer and closer to the end of this nightmare, or closer and closer to the beginning of a new one.



The road leading up to the palace was lit with stars. At least it appeared to be stars. Mae wasn't sure what sort of magic was being used, but small globes lined the road each containing a tiny galaxy. The effect

was mesmerizing. Mae gazed out of the window as they joined a short line of carriages. Everyone in Elecara was either in line or in the palace.

Amazing what a little threat will do to people. The slow-moving line finally had moved forward enough for them to be greeted by a soldier in silver and red.

"Invitation," he said, holding out his hand.

"Does the invite really matter? The whole Kingdom is required to be here or die," Kiel stage whispered, the soldier narrowing his eyes at the carriage.

"Shut up, Kiel," Mae said through clenched teeth. She lifted her mask, it was a deep midnight blue, the color of the sky before sunrise, the eyes were rimmed in rubies, horns spiraled from the top of the mask, the tips of them also dipped in a dark scarlet as if bleeding.

Daemon, ironic, she thought to herself. Also how is this supposed to hide me, anyway? It ends at my nose; everyone knows what my hair looks like. Rolling her eyes, she tied the lace behind her head, fluffing her hair out to cover the knot. She heard a grunt beside her and watched as Ophelia struggled to get her mask to sit just right. Mae put her hand out, wiggling her fingers so Ophelia would give her the mask. It was as elegant as it was elaborate, the left of the mask a dusty pink matching her dress, a plumage of feathers erupting beside her ear, the other side was an intricate lace work in hues of gold, a chain of delicate pearls hung under her eye. Mae wasn't sure how it was possible, but once it was affixed in place Ophelia looked even more beautiful.

She heard Turran speaking with the soldier outside.

"The Prince of the Sun you say, and his advisors and guards. Talk about an entourage. Well, far be it from me to tell a God how to arrive at a ball. You can let your animals graze over there."

"Róisín, I doubt the townsfolk are aware of your capture, but I am positive Balo's battalions are aware of your escape," the Prince said, pulling his small daughter close to him.

"Yes, there was a whole ordeal, bells, alarms, stabbing, a daring escape," Kiel said, bored.

"Stabbing?" The Prince looked appalled, caught off guard he continued, "uh... okay, well I was going to say it would be best if you used your powers to blend into the shadows until we are in the ballroom."

“Of course, papa,” Róisín replied as she jumped down from the carriage. She flicked her wrists and the shadows around her deepened. She seemed to blur into the landscape around her.

“Amazing! You're the coolest Goddess I know, Ró!” Kiel said.

“Excuse me!” Ophelia looked appalled.

“Can you do that?” he asked her.

“Well, no... but I've known you longer.” She stamped her foot, a movement that was somehow incredibly delicate.

“Don't worry Lia, you're amazing too. Now let's go party.” He linked his arms with the two girls, ushering them toward the west gate. The Prince trailed behind them, with Turran and a small blur at his side. Anyone who glanced at them wouldn't even notice Róisín. Mae swallowed the lump in her throat. Her nerves were on fire. Balo knew they were coming. She could feel it.

They walked through a magnificent archway; stone pillars twisted to the sky before bending to meet each other embracing in an arch like dance partners above their heads. Intricate carvings of creatures Mae had no names for spun all the way around the pillars. The ceiling was painted to look like the sky after a storm. Deep blues and grays swirled around each other, wispy white clouds threaded throughout. Beneath their feet a plush red carpet, the edges lined in silver, stretched out toward the ballroom, beckoning them forward. Mae could hear nervous chatter around them.

“Lucien has returned,” a voice stuttered.

“He was dead!” someone exclaimed, awestruck.

“Does my hair look okay?” a young female asked her friends. They nodded, gushing about her hair and how the chestnut color shone in the light. The group followed the small gaggle of girls into the ballroom. Their flouncy gowns ranged from vermillion to violet. They floated around the room as a group looking for suitors, or at the very least a dance partner. Mae caught Kiel as he stared at one of the girls, the one with the shining chestnut hair falling down her back in silky waves. Her cream-colored dress hugged every plump curve. Her chest was accentuated by her corset style top, her bare shoulders glowed in the dim light. Bubble sleeves tapered around her wrists.

“Why don't you go say hello,” Mae muttered, hoping to be loud enough that the girl would turn around.

“Stop it, Mae! I'm far too sober, and important to the mission,” Kiel said, serious and sad all at once.

“You can have a little fun, Kiel, you deserve it. We can't go anywhere until we know Balo is in the ballroom and not walking the halls where he can find us,” Ophelia said. She beamed at him.

“You're right.” Kiel brightened and skipped away from the girls. Mae watched as he grabbed a drink off a passing tray and downed it in one swift motion. He trotted after the girl in cream, and tapped her on the shoulder, bowing low and extending his hand. She giggled while taking it and he swept her into a dance, spinning her around the room.

Mae slipped her arm through Ophelia's as they followed the Prince and Róisín around the ballroom. She saw Turran hang back, silently making his way to the south side of the room.

So, he can be quiet. Mae was surprised. Her Daemon father looked distinguished in dark gray slacks and a matching coat; armor adorned his chest in the same polished bronze as The God of Light.

The ballroom was extravagant. Ropes of silver lights hung from the ceiling, creating a spider web effect, however instead of dew drops there were tiny points of light. An elevated stage where a small orchestra played for the crowd sat off to the side, beautiful notes from violins and flutes surrounded Mae; she was entranced, wanting to dance but not wanting to trip over her own feet. A red-carpeted staircase led to a platform where two silver thrones sat.

Empty, Balo hasn't made his entrance yet. I'm sure he's waiting for the entire Kingdom to be here first. Along one wall there was a long table. Atop it was every type of food Mae could think of. She made her way over, sampling meats and cheeses. She picked up a pearlescent green piece of something, popping it in her mouth, a salty taste spread over her tongue, underneath the salt was the distinct taste of fish. She didn't know which kind, but it was delicious. Palace staff glided through the crowd expertly holding trays aloft full of drinks; sparkling champagne and a clear liquid Mae assumed was a spirit of some sort. She grabbed two long flutes of champagne from a passing tray and brought them over to Ophelia.

“Would you like one?” she asked, already knowing the answer. Ophelia shook her head, turning down the drink. Mae shrugged, downing the first glass and bringing the second to her lips.

"I'll take that!" Kiel plucked the glass from her hand, laughing and spinning the girl with the chestnut hair away from them.

"Excuse me! Rude!" Mae stomped her foot, grabbing another drink from a tray as it passed. She sipped this one, letting the bubbles tickle her throat. Ophelia took her hand as the music slowed.

"Dance with me?" Ophelia asked, her voice soft as a whisper.

"Are you sure that's a good idea, Lia? I might step on your feet, and you're in slippers. They won't offer much protection," she pointed out.

"Mae." Ophelia took the glass from her hand, setting it down on a table. "Shut up and dance with me." Ophelia put one arm around Mae's waist and drew her in close. Mae relented and snaked her arm up, so it rested around Ophelia's slender neck. She brushed her fingers through the strands of hair falling out at the nape of her neck. She felt Ophelia shiver.

"You know," Mae whispered, rising on her toes to brush her lips against Ophelia's ear. "I really should be leading you. Since you know, I wear the leather pants around here."

"Maeva, it is quite clear the champagne bubbles have gone to your head. Do you even know one dance? I will lead." Ophelia spun Mae in a circle. The slow music drifted through the room, couples pairing off to dance with one another.

"I could dance with you forever," Mae whispered, closing the already small space between them. Her head was swimming, she was drunk on Ophelia, and she never wanted to sober.

"You can dance with me forever, Mae," Ophelia whispered, dipping her. Mae felt her heart skip. She couldn't get enough of this woman.

"Forever isn't long enough. I want eons," Mae replied as Ophelia brought her back up and held her close. She lifted her head and Ophelia closed the distance between their lips. The kiss was soft, tentative, like asking a question you were nervous to get the answer to. These weren't the hungry animalistic kisses they had shared in bed. This was love, though she had never felt it like this before. Every part of her body relaxed. "My fire, my inferno. I would move planets for you," she whispered against Ophelia's lips, closing her eyes. "I have admired you for as long as I can remember. My beautiful Goddess." She could feel butterflies in her stomach again as she dipped Lia.

"I love you, Maeva, more than anything. You're the only person I want to be with. I want all of you, promise me, promise me that after this you

will stay with me,” Ophelia begged, she sounded nervous.

“I promise,” Mae replied quickly, not worrying about whether or not she would be able to stay in the Afterworld. Bliss radiated from her chest. She had the most beautiful woman standing before her, wrapped in her arms. She never wanted this to end. She was never going to let it end.

“As my wife.” Ophelia pulled back slightly, looking down into Mae's eyes, the sunrise looking hopeful and bashful all at once.

“As your... Do you mean what I think you mean?” Mae looked startled.

“Yes, marry me, Maeva, I want it all, marriage, kids, everything. You are the only one for me,” Ophelia whispered. The room closed in around them, leaving them as the only two people in the world.

“Ophelia, you're going to stay in the Afterworld after this... is it even possible for me to stay with you? Kids? How...” Mae asked, dismay ran through her.

“I don't care. I will make it possible,” Ophelia stated firmly. Mae chuckled at her determination. If Ophelia believed in them, then she would too. They would be together.

“Then yes, a million times yes,” She relented. Ophelia squealed, sweeping Mae off her feet and spinning her around. Mae laughed, feeling a lightness in her chest. Ophelia kissed her again, tender and hungry, possessive.

“Maeva of Elecara, you have made me the happiest Goddess in existence.”

“And I plan to do that forever,” Mae claimed as the last notes of the song drifted to silence. A deep chime vibrated in her chest, bringing her back to the ballroom; the crowd craned their necks toward the sound. Silence filled the room, as if everyone was holding their breath at once. It felt like a bubble where the tiniest prick would burst the pressure. Mae could hear footsteps, commanding the room the closer they got. The heavy curtain behind the thrones started to rustle. The room seemed to dim. Maybe it was because Mae was holding her breath, or maybe it was on purpose. Spots started to swim in her vision, the room undoubtedly dimming because she was holding her breath; she let it out as a large dark brown hand grasped the curtain from the other side. Out stepped a man dressed in silver and red armor, the leviathan stamped on his breastplate. He wore a helmet that came down to his nose, red feathers plumed out of

the top, wiggling around as he moved. Mae tried to keep herself from laughing. The ridiculous feathers made the man look like he belonged in the circus and not at the palace. He cleared his throat, like a bomb in the complete silence.

“The illustrious King Balo, first of his name, greatest ruler Elecara has ever seen, humbly welcomes you to his palace.”

“Greatest ruler, humble, definitely belongs in the same sentence.” Mae rolled her eyes, her hands on her hips.

“I would like you all to join me in greeting our great King.” A spattering of applause rang through the ballroom. Some people were shouting Balo's name. Mae peeked over at them, they were clearly Elecara's wealthiest citizens. She saw her mother and the man she called father for twenty-three years applauding and shouting as if their lives depended on it.

Rather, their fortune depended on it. Mae thought. She saw the curtain pull back smoothly out of the corner of her eye, turning her attention back to the stage. She watched Balo slowly make his way to the front of the platform.

“Welcome citizens of Elecara,” he said, spreading his arms out in mock affection. Mae could see the glint in his eye, the slow descent into madness he was spiraling toward. “I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for joining me tonight. It is a wondrous night.”

“Oh yes. They had a choice,” Kiel said, sliding up beside Mae. The girl with the chestnut colored hair hung off his arm, giggling and running her hand down his back.

“First, a bit of bad news, very, very bad indeed. My traitor daughter has still not been found, however we are searching day and night for her. As your King I vow to protect you from this evil girl. Girl child. She will be found, and I swear to you Elecara, your heads, her head will roll for bringing the Gods wrath upon the Kingdom,” Balo said, repeating his words as if he had forgotten between one and the next what he was saying.

“Oh, you're so evil, Ophelia,” Róisín said, grabbing her hand.

“He's trying to paint you as the bad one, when it's him who is losing his mind. It's okay Lia, breathe,” Mae said, rubbing circles on Ophelia's back as she started to hyperventilate.

“He... he... he... can't do this,” she cried.

“Lia. It's okay,” Mae said, putting a protective arm around her, wanting more than anything to shield her from this nightmare.

Stand beside her, not in front of her. The words Turran said earlier flooded back.

“Stand up Lia. He knows we're here. He's trying to bait you,” she said. Ophelia nodded once, straightening her back and wiping the tears from her eyes. They listened as Balo continued.

“You, the people of Elecara, you are the blood life, the blood, running red, red like a river, of this Kingdom. You all know our kingdom suffered a tragedy when we lost our beloved heir to the throne, Lucien. Lucien my boy under water.” Mae noticed that Balo seemed to deflate when he spoke of his son. “I have, I have single-handedly fought the Gods. Yes, me, Gods. To bring Lucien back to us.” The crowd gasped collectively, everyone breathing in at the same time. Mae's hair rustled around her face at the sudden change in pressure. No one noticed or seemed to not notice that their king was stumbling over his words.

“Liar,” Róisín hissed beside her.

“Bide your time Ró this *will* end tonight,” Mae said, patting the child goddess' shoulder. A boy stepped out from behind the curtain. He was quiet, poised. His hands folded behind his back. His gray, bloated skin looked like he had been living underwater for years. Mae could see the skin flaking off of his hands where they were exposed. Black veins bulged in his neck, pulsing with a too fast heartbeat. The stench of death and rot permeated the room. It grasped Mae's throat, causing her to buckle over gasping for air.

“A round of appreciation, please, for my beloved son. The precious boy, Prince Lucien.” Balo bowed low to his son, who just stood silent as a stone. He glared out over the crowd, his black eyes endless pits.

The ballroom erupted into noise.

Chapter Twenty-two



Chaos.

The room was complete and utter chaos. Mae watched women fall to their knees, harrowing screams coming out of their mouths. Their eyes opened wide in varying shades of horror. She watched as a distinguished gentleman vomited the contents of his stomach onto the floor. The smell permeated the room, sickly and sweet as it mixed with the death and rot stench from the boy in front of them. Her stomach recoiled as she tried to hold the contents in. She watched as children hid behind their mothers' skirts, tears ran down their cherub faces. Their wails assaulted Mae's ears. She felt a hand grab hers. It startled her out of the horror she was seeing in front of her. Ophelia's soft fingers trembled in her hand, grounding her. Lucien, her brother, had fused with nightmares and become something horrendous. Ophelia stared in shock, as the monster who used to be her baby brother stared at the crowd silent as stone.

"What is that?" someone wailed

"Monster!"

"Daemon!"

"Disgusting creature!" Lucien watched the mayhem taking place below him. His skinny arms folded behind his back, the peeling gray fingers clasped together. His foot tapped out a rhythm that Mae could hear above the noise in the room. It wormed its way into her head and pounded against her skull. She could feel a headache coming on. Lifting her hand to her face, she felt blood running from her nose. How was he causing all this

pain by just standing there? His pitiless eyes stared. It was unnerving to see him/ He looked bored as the crowd reacted to his appearance. Something moved behind him. Mae couldn't make out what it was, but it looked vaguely human in form.

"Silence!" Balo bellowed. The room continued in disarray. "Quiet. *Please*. So much noise, noise. Stop screaming, stop," he tried again, clamping his hands over his ears, however no one could hear him. "No, no, no this was not supposed to be this way! You are supposed to adore him! He returned from the *Afterworld*! He is the first human to do so! He deserves your love!" Balo started pacing the platform. He muttered to himself, pulling at his hair. Dark brown clumps landed softly on the floor. Mae couldn't help but wonder if when Lucien came back from whatever nightmare world he faced, because he had to have been stuck in a nightmare to look like this, that his father's mental state deteriorated quicker than anticipated. Maybe Lucien was the cause.

Mae was pinned in place as Lucien took a step forward, her hands slick with sweat. She could feel her heart racing. He came to stand in front of the thrones, peering down at the crowd like a cat watching mice stumble over each other to get away. He looked hungry, like he was ready to devour every soul in the room.

"*Enough*," he spoke. Mae could not tell if his lips moved or if he had penetrated her thoughts. The command both silent and loud, echoed through her head. The pounding headache persisted, getting worse with every breath she took.

"You are all acting like incessant toddlers. I demand respect and respect is what I shall receive." Mae was sure his lips did not move; his eyes bore into her, and his words rumbled around in her head. She felt dizzy. She could taste the blood in the back of her throat. Kiel put his arm around her to steady her.

"Elecara, I demand you kneel to me. I am your king, now," Lucien's voice boomed in her head. She watched as the crowd started to quiet down, some of them getting down on one knee, shaking with fear. He must be in everyone's heads.

"Son, you must understand your place," Balo chided. "My throne it is still my throne. Not your place, not yet. No, no, this is not how it is supposed to be." He continued to pace.

“Shut up, you insolent fool! I have had enough of your ridiculous prattling,” Lucien cried, waving a hand. Balo flew across the room, colliding with one of the stone pillars. His body crumpled to the floor, screams erupted from the people standing closest to him, they scrambled from his sprawled limbs. Mae rose on her toes to try to take in the scene, holding steady to Ophelia and Kiel, who both looked shocked at the turn of events. Balo groaned, trying to rise up on his arms.

“Lucien!” he shrieked. “What are you doing, child? My child, boy Lucien. We are supposed to rule together, together” He spat blood onto the floor, fear contorted his features as the crowd parted like water and Lucien glided toward him.

“Together? You really have lost it, father. There is no together. There is me. There is only me!” Lucien shrieked, a wind picked up in the ballroom. Mae was fascinated with the display of power.

“Lucien, please,” Balo begged, trying desperately to get up off the floor. “I love you. I stole the Gods for you, my boy my baby.”

“Silence! You let love cloud your judgment. You are a coward, father. You let Ophelia get away. You let me *die*. You are not fit to rule this Kingdom. Look at you, lying on the floor like the pathetic fool that you are! Stop lying to everyone. Tell them the truth!” Lucien flicked his finger. His father's head whipped to the side, a sickening crunch sounded through the room as his cheek smashed into the pillar again.

“The truth! The truth!” the crowd shouted, their eyes glazed over, no longer afraid of the child prince. They pounded the walls and stomped the floor like wild animals. Elecara was now at the mercy of the boy, gazing at him with adoration.

“The truth? I have told you all the truth. What more is there to tell? Citizens of Elecara *I* have done nothing but make sure this kingdom prospers. I have sacrificed everything for you! *I* fought the Gods for Lucien's return.” Balo's eyes focused, a moment of clarity piercing through the haze of his mind. Mae realized that what Balo was saying was what he thought to be true, no matter what the truth actually was. She watched in horror as Lucien shook his head.

“So disappointing,” he stated. His blank stare bore down on his father. He gestured with his hands. Balo flew into the air. Lucien brought his clenched fist down on his open palm, his father's body following the

movement. He crashed into the floor, blood gushing from his crushed nose.

“Lucien!” he pleaded, sputtering as he choked.

“Stop begging. You are no longer fit to rule this Kingdom, father. Your time on the throne is over.” Lucien made a fist again. Balo clawed at his neck. Mae stood frozen in place, watching as Balo's throat collapsed on itself, cutting off his air supply. Lucien moved his fingers again, sending his father flying back into the pillar, smashing his head over and over until it was nothing more than a bloody, pulpy mess.

“Now, Elecara. Bow to me,” his piercing voice rang through the ballroom.

“Long live Lucien, the righteous Boy King of Elecara!” a voice shouted, others followed until the entire room was chanting Lucien's name and crowding toward him, out of fear or respect Mae could not be sure. She saw people step over Balo's crumpled body, some spitting on him as they passed. Most turned away from the mess on the floor. Everyone accepted the monster child as their new King much easier than Mae had expected. Fear will do that to a kingdom.

Well, we are completely fucked now. She thought to herself.



Lucien retired from the ballroom demanding that the kingdom celebrate him until the sun rose again in the sky. The townsfolk seemed determined to do just that. The small orchestra struck up a hearty jig. The crowd was quickly swept up in the happy music. They twirled around one another, drinking their fill until they were red in the face. Mae saw a couple soldiers slip into the ballroom and collect Balo's indistinguishable body. As the body was taken from the room, Mae felt some of the tension in her head lessen. She wasn't sure if she felt sorry for the former king, but she didn't think anyone should die at the hand of their own child.

Yes, he deserved everything that came to him. A voice inside her said. She couldn't deny she was enthralled with the power Lucien possessed. She envied him, wishing that having a Daemon father would give her some kind of power as well. She wouldn't deny that watching Balo being slammed against the stone was thrilling. She was however sure that she would feel that thrill if it was anyone that was being beaten to a pulp. She

silently cursed her father for this disgusting animal that was inside of her. Interrupting her dark thoughts was a tug at her skirt. She looked down to see Róisín.

"It is time," she whispered, slipping away into the crowd. People moved out of her way without even seeing her. Mae whistled three short notes, watching as a tiny eagle flew down from the rafters. Orion landed on her shoulder, Mae silently thanking the Lady she remembered to put on the leather shoulder cap for him. She murmured low under her breath, asking him to signal for Kiel. It was time to get this show on the road. As Orion took off to find Kiel, Mae unsheathed her eagle dagger, twirling it around her fingers, a sharp dance that kept her focused. She grabbed Ophelia's hand, spinning her around, crashing her lips into Ophelia's perfect pink mouth.

"If I don't make it. I love you, Ophelia. Never forget that," she said quietly, not ready to give up the last moment she may see the person she loved.

"Shut up Mae, you're going to make it out of here alive, we all are," Ophelia replied, cupping her face as she returned her kiss with passion.

"Yeah, you're the hero or something aren't you? Heroes don't die," Kiel said, coming up behind them, the girl with the chestnut hair close behind. Up close, Mae could see that she had the brightest hazel eyes, the color of the forest after a violent storm. She was curvy, her large chest almost popping out of her dress.

"Kiel... you can't bring her. Leave her here," Mae said firmly.

"*Her* name is Aliss, and she can help," Kiel insisted, gesturing wildly at the woman standing beside him. Her deep brown cheeks blushed an even deeper pink.

"Oh really? Humor me," Mae said, trying to direct her friends toward the North hall without drawing too much attention.

"She's a sorceress," Kiel said, taking Aliss' hand.

"Three Eyes, Kiel, how much have you had to drink?" Mae spun on him, standing up on her toes to poke him in the chest.

"Nothing! Okay that one I took from you, and that other one, but nothing else!" Kiel put his hands up in defense.

"Can you two stop your bickering, *please*. There are four soldiers standing in our way, and you two are going to get us all killed before we even make it out of the ballroom. Can you *focus*?" Ophelia hissed. Mae

stuck her tongue out at Kiel who in turn shot her a very obscene gesture with his hand. Both of them smiled. Their disagreement forgotten family as always.

“Fine,” Mae relented, “but you’re responsible. If she dies. It’s on you.” Kiel nodded once, his eyes tight.

They crept through the tightly packed bodies. The smell of alcohol and fear assaulted Mae's nose. The crowd danced around them, celebrating the new King of Elecara. No one seemed to spare them a glance, as they slipped through the crowd. They made it to the North side of the ballroom with little trouble. Save Ophelia's toes that were stepped on.

“I told you, useless slippers,” Mae said, kicking her boot out from under her skirt. Ophelia rolled her eyes, holding up her arm to stop the group from going any further.

“Four of them, four of us. Everyone take a soldier. Be swift, be silent.” Ophelia looked back at the group. Mae tried to hide her pride. Her woman was taking charge and she loved it.

“Nope. Not even. No. You three stay here,” Mae said. She looked at Ophelia. Although proud, she wasn’t ready for her to lead. “First of all, when did you decide you were in charge? Also, I've got the daggers.” She slid the angel dagger out of its hiding place, feeling the weight of it in her hand, balancing the eagle dagger in her other hand. Ophelia tried to grab one of the daggers, Mae pulled back, shaking her head. No, she was going to do this alone. She was going to make sure her family stayed safe. She held a finger to her lips as she shifted back and forth on the balls of her feet before taking off, silent as water, swifter than the wind. She had three of the four soldiers' throats slit before the fourth one could turn to see what the commotion was. He lifted his sword, pointing it at Mae's heart. She ducked as he swung, coming up under his arms and burying her dagger to the hilt into his skull through the soft spot under his jaw. He fell to the floor, her dagger releasing with a slick, wet sound.

“May the Lady have mercy,” she whispered as she bent down and closed the soldier’s eyes on an unforgiving world, forgotten, never to open again. Ophelia and Kiel came up behind her, while Aliss hung back, watching the hall. Together they dragged the bodies behind one of the pillars and proceeded into the North corridor. It stretched before them, quiet.

“This seems too easy,” Mae muttered.

“Well, we've got no choice but to keep going,” Ophelia said. “We can only hope Róisín, and the Prince are having as much luck as we are.” She stepped into the darkness. Mae followed, putting a hand on the wall to keep herself steady in the complete black that surrounded them. Void of her sight, her heart sped up, pounding in her ears as she walked into the unknown. Slowly, they proceeded down the corridor, keeping their steps light so they didn't draw any attention to themselves. Mae heard voices ahead of them

“There's a party going on and we get to hang out here,” someone sighed, a dull clang rang out as metal hit marble. The soldier must have smacked a pillar with his sword.

“It's fucking ridiculous. I was supposed to be in there tonight, not here standing at the stairs. Lydia said she had a dress that I would be doing everything I could to get off of her,” the second soldier said, his voice gruff, anger filled, that he was missing the festivities.

Mae quickly disposed of the two soldiers that were standing guard at the bottom of a staircase, dead before they hit the floor. She felt a small pang of remorse that the soldier wouldn't get to see Lydia and her dress; she shook her head to clear it. These soldiers did not deserve her sympathy. Pretty girl or not, they probably had orders to kill her on sight.

I guess they'd have to see me first. She left the soldiers where they were and waved her friends on. There was no point in hiding them. If someone knew they had made it this far, there wouldn't be anywhere to run. They had reached the staircase. It spiraled further and further upward, into the dark.

Tower. How predictable. Mae thought as they walked. Windows lined one side of the staircase, Mae saw the night sky as they ascended. The stars were at their fullest, but the moon still oddly missing. It was a creepy sight; the moon missing for so long from the sky where it belonged. They passed a room on the way up, moans slipped out under the door, a steady creak underscoring the whimpers in a heated song.

“Lydia! Oh Gods! Yes!” Grunts and heavy breathing came faster from the room as whoever was going at Lydia felt release.

“Damn, that soldier died, *and* his girl fucked someone else. Bad night all around,” Kiel said. Mae chortled the utter ridiculousness of Kiel's statement mixed with nerves making the sound more pained than she meant.

“By the Prince, Kiel, can you ever be serious?” Ophelia said.

“Honestly Lia? It's unlikely. It's part of my charm.” He winked at Aliss, causing her to giggle.

“Alright peanut gallery, I think we're here, so maybe... enough with the jokes for a while?” Mae said as she stepped down hard on the landing at the top of the stairs. A small, dark hallway ended at a heavy wooden door. Mae turned the knob.

Locked. Wow, I am so surprised.

“Well, good thing I put on my *boots*,” she said loudly, as she bent down and unsnapped a pocket on the outside of her left calf. She pulled out her lock picks and got to work. The door posed her biggest challenge yet. A series of locks lined the door from top to bottom. She refused to give up, not having met a door she couldn't coerce into opening.

“Almost got it.” She twisted the pick hard and felt it fall to the floor. “Nothing? Still. Shit,” she cursed and took the pick from Orion's beak; she stuck it back into the lock, maneuvering it around, turning it the opposite way until a satisfying *click* reached her ears, the locks finally giving way.

“That's more like it. Never met a door I couldn't break.” She beamed, standing up she brushed her skirt off. She felt Ophelia rush past her to open the door. Mae felt her heart jump as the darkness of the room beyond swallowed Ophelia whole, her body disappearing.

“Hello?” Ophelia called into the dark. No one returned her greeting.

“Well, it wouldn't be locked if there was nothing to hide. Let's take a look around,” Mae said and she, Kiel, and Aliss walked into the black abyss of the room at the top of the tower. Mae couldn't see anything, the blackness so complete that if she hadn't felt the floor underneath her feet, she would have sworn she was floating. She was disoriented, the room throwing her off balance. She gripped the wall as she waited for her eyes to adjust.

“I can't see a damn thing!” Kiel said, thumping into something. He yelped, a string of colorful curses coming from his mouth. There were no sounds, no scents to indicate someone was in the room with them. She spun around a few more times. She could finally see the formless shapes and shadows in the room.

“I think we're going to have to cut our losses here. We clearly didn't take the right path. Hopefully, the Prince and Ró had better luck than we did finding her. We should get to them and help,” Mae said, as she headed

back toward the open doorway, which she could only decipher because it was a touch lighter than the complete black surrounding her. As she reached the door, she heard something in the room, someone rather, exhale slowly.

“Did you say Ró?”



“Did you say Ró? Like Róisín!” a strained voice came through the dark. Chains jangled around them, the room filling with an awful metal on metal noise.

“Who's there?” Mae asked, terror crept up her back.

“Answer me! Did you say Ró!” the voice cried; a jangle of chains being pulled again.

“Yes... I said Ró,” Mae confirmed, confusion mixed with the fear. Sweat ran down her back.

“As in Róisín? The Goddess of Shadows?” the voice bellowed, gaining confidence with every word coming out of its mouth.

“Yes,” Mae said.

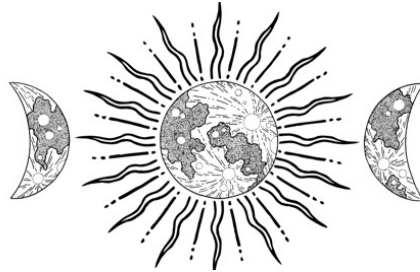
“My... my... daughter. Is she okay? Please tell me she is okay!” the voice sobbed. Feminine and light, filled with despair and hope. Mae heard footsteps scramble from the room. Long moments in the dark passed in silence. Mae could hear the ragged breathing of her friends; she could see the outline of a bed and a heap of something against the wall. Before long, the footsteps returned. A flickering light entered the room. Ophelia's face lit up by flame that was proudly showing off. She brought the flame closer to the heap, approaching slowly. The heap moved, grunting and groaning as it unfolded itself. Mae heard a gasp and couldn't tell if it was hers or someone else's.

The heap unfurled, although dirty Mae could see the beauty of the woman in front of them. Her moon pale skin was bright in the flame; her ebony hair, flecked with silver, snaked around her, covering most of her naked body. Her eyes bore into Mae's chest, right where her soul should be. Coal black and deep, they held the secrets of the universe. Three Eyes all blinking slowly, one for the past one for the present and one for the future. Mae held her breath. She couldn't believe her own eyes.

“Three eyes of the Lady,” she whispered in awe.

“The one and only,” the heap replied, coughing struggling against the chains that bound its wrists.

The Lady of Darkness



“Well, it's a good thing I put on my boots,” a muffled voice on the other side of the door brought her out of a fitful sleep.

If you could consider that sleep. She thought. She turned toward the door as someone tried to unlock it.

“Shit,” she heard the voice on the other side of the door. Was this her savior? Or her doom? Whoever it was, they weren't being quiet, and they didn't seem too worried about being so. She folded in on herself, curling into a ball as well as she could with the chains. Her hair coiled around her to shield her from whatever was coming. The dirty robe sat in a rumpled pile beside her. She thought about trying to put it back on, deciding it wouldn't matter in the end.

She peered through her hair as the door slowly swung inward. She watched a slender figure enter the room. In a swish of skirts, a voluminous gown puffed out around her. The girl was slender and tall, her stark white hair in contrast with her golden skin. She looked so afraid, but determined to walk into the room.

“Hello?” a tinkling voice called out.

The Lady remained still. She was thankful to Lucien for one thing. He had torn off the cloth on her eyes and never replaced it. She could see everything. An advantage, which was possibly the only one she had. She watched as three more figures entered the room, fanning out to look for something, or someone. Her perhaps? These people were children, her saviors or her slayers were all under the age of twenty-five.

How embarrassing.

“Hopefully the Prince and Ró.” Her heart caught in her throat. Ró? Was this girl speaking of her daughter? Her Prince! She couldn't hide anymore. Whoever was in this room knew who Róisín was, she would kill them to find out where she was.

“Did you say Ró?” she asked, her voice raspy after a few days without much use. She didn't move from her cocoon of hair.

“Who's there?” a voice, female but much rougher than the girl who first spoke.

“Answer me! Did you say Ró?” She could feel the anger rising in her. She could feel the waves of fear washing over her, smothering her. She did not have time for humans and their ridiculous fear. She had to leave this place, she had to find her family.

“Yes... I said Ró,” the voice confirmed, equal parts curiosity and fear. Ró, Róisín! The voice did say the Prince as well. Had someone freed her daughter from this hell? She felt her chest constrict as she thought of her daughter, recaptured by Balo for a second time. She would rip him to shreds for what he had done.

Did she finally have someone on her side, or was she going to have to fight her way out of here and to the beings she cared for the most?

“My... my... daughter. Is she okay? Please tell me she is okay!” she cried.

She heard footsteps leave and return, flickering light now dancing around the room. Flooding her senses with color, the figures standing above her, one girl with white hair, one with black, a girl huddled in the corner in a cream dress, a male trying to comfort her. Slowly, she unfolded herself. Her hair had a mind of its own and swirled around her to cover her, offering her a little bit of privacy.

“Three Eyes of the Lady,” the black-haired girl breathed out, her eyes wide as saucers.

“The one and only,” she said, rising to her full height, pulling against her chains. She felt the stone move slightly, still not giving her freedom.

“Who are you?” she boomed, her voice echoing off the walls of her circular prison. No one answered her, the humans standing and staring at her in shock.

“I asked you a question, mortal. Who are you?” she boomed again. She saw a girl with the white hair jump and scurry over to the raven-haired

girl, clutching her arm, digging her nails into bone pale flesh.

Not mortal. Daemon. Halfling! She sneered at the girl.

“How dare you stand in my presence halfling!” she shrieked, pulling against her restraints, feeling her grip on her mind slip.

“How dare I?” the girl asked, standing up to her full height, which the Lady noted was very short and not very intimidating. “How dare I!” she shouted. “For fuck sakes! I gallivant all over this kingdom! I traveled through Varanstalle! Went over that fucking bridge *and came all the way back here* even though I didn't have to. To *save* you! I do not deserve to be insulted. Goddess or not, *My Lady*.” The girl bowed, mocking her. She stood as still as a statue, wracking her brain for some kind of explanation.

Varanstalle? The bridge? What is going on? She leveled her eyes at the children standing in front of her. The girl with the dark hair, arms crossed over her chest, arrogance oozing from every pore. The girl with bronze skin, luminous even in the dark, she could feel waves of sympathy from her, an underlying current of nerves as well. A boy, pale blonde hair, tall, broad chest. She heard a match strike and smelled the pungent odor of tobacco. The fourth human... No, not human either... a sorceress?

“Has Balo sent you to finally end me halfling? I see you brought a child of magic with you. Make it quick.”

“Excuse me? We're not going to kill you! We've traveled all over your green Earth to find you!” the pale girl explained, pinching the bridge of her nose.

“Someone better explain then, and make it quick,” she said, slumping back to the floor. All the fight going out of her, exhaustion took over, she'd been here too long. She looked up as the girl with the white hair approached her, slowly like she was a wild animal. Perhaps she was. She was ready to rip the halfling to shreds for being in her presence.

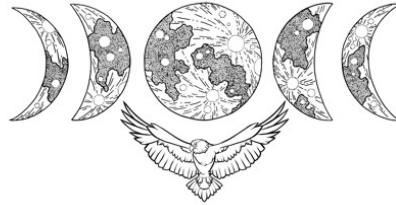
“Excuse me, *My Lady*,” the white-haired girl said quietly. “May I please sit?” She nodded, and the girl sank to the floor beside her. She stretched out her hand, reaching for her. She noticed the girl's fingers. They appeared to be dipped in flame.

No. The girl took her hand, a sharp contrast to her own. The girl's bronze skin shone next to her marble white.

No. *It* couldn't be. *Could it?* No... she couldn't dare hope she refused to. The girl opened her mouth, and one word was whispered, shattering her entire reality.

“Mother?”

Chapter Twenty-three



The Lady of Darkness, Mother Moon, fell forward against Ophelia. Reaching a bone pale hand up to caress her cheek. Tears of black and silver poured from her eyes.

“It can't be,” the Lady whispered. Ophelia took her. Mae could see the sparkle of tears forming in the corners of her eyes. She felt her nose start to itch, her own tears gathering.

“It can,” Ophelia murmured, so quiet she almost didn't get the words out. “It is.” She flung her arms around the Lady's neck, pulling her forward, both of them sobbing. The Goddess tried to return the embrace, ultimately being cut short by the chains that bound her wrists. Ophelia glanced at them, letting out a small cry.

“Mae!” she begged. “Mae please. Can you get her out?” Mae moved further into the room, the warm flame from the torch flickering around her. She slid her lock picks out of her boot and bent down next to the Lady.

“A common thief. Why am I not surprised?” the Goddess huffed. She turned her head to the side and laid it against the stone.

“I can leave,” Mae said, shrugging her shoulders, rocking back on her heels she started to stand. Ophelia gasped in shock.

“Wait,” the Lady commanded. She hissed through her teeth. “I'm... sorry,” she choked out, putting a hand to her chest as if it physically pained her to apologize. “Please, I would be forever grateful if you would free me from this hell-hole,” she stumbled over her words; Mae bit her tongue against her reply and kneeled before the Lady again. She started with her

most slender pick. Inserting it into the keyhole, she twisted and maneuvered the metal around.

Snap

“You’ve got to be kidding me! It broke!” Mae seethed. She took another pick and started again. The first one landed, *plink*, on the floor. She felt the slender metal bend in her palm, about to snap again. Sighing, she sat back. “I can’t do anything; all my picks are going to break.” She threw one of them down in anger, listening to the metal roll along the stone and disappear out of sight. She felt useless. She had never met this kind of barrier before. She’d always been able to get a lock to open. Fletcher taught her well.

“It’s okay Mae.” Ophelia put a hand on her shoulder. “You tried.” Hopelessness settled over the room; everyone was at a loss.

“Tried isn’t succeeding, Lia,” Mae whined, dejection making a home in her chest like an elephant was sitting on her. “Fucking useless pieces of metal. This has never happened before.” She started to pace the small circular room, folding and unfolding her arms, putting her hands on her hips. *Thinking*.

“Can we just... pull the chains out of the wall? I know it’ll be uncomfortable, but at least you’ll be able to move.” Mae maneuvered herself around the Lady of Darkness, trying to inspect the wall in the dim light.

“You don’t think I thought of that already, halfling? You don’t think if it was somehow possible for me to not be sitting on this cold floor, *naked*, that I wouldn’t have already done just that?” The Lady looked at her, her charcoal black eyes stared into Mae’s being, pinning her in place, scrutinizing her.

“Can everyone stop calling me a halfling!” Mae stomped to the other side of the room, plunking down on the cold stone and crossing her arms over her chest. She refused to do anything else for these Gods until someone showed her some respect. She knew she was being childish, but she had done so much and no one had the courtesy to thank her.

“Mother,” Ophelia started sinking down beside her again. “Mae did reunite us after all these centuries. Don’t you think you should cut her a little slack?” Her eyes pleaded with The Goddess, who simply nodded.

“Also, for the record, *I* didn’t notice you were naked,” Kiel said. Aliss smacked him on the back of the head.

“Really, Kiel?” she said, the first time she had spoken, her voice was gentle but firm. Mae looked up from her pity party and smiled. This girl would be good for him, she’d keep him in line.

“I’m being honest.” He shrugged. “I’ve only had eyes for you since I set them upon you earlier.” Aliss blushed at his declaration, taking his hand in hers.

“Is this really the time?” Mae said.

“No, it isn’t,” a voice said from the doorway. They all turned to the voice as a collective. Mae instantly recognized the imposing shadow that now stood in the threshold. A small shadow seemed to slither away from him and into the middle of the room. Quickly, a wind picked up, blowing Mae’s hair around her face. Her curls in her mouth, causing her to sputter.

“Mama!” Róisín barreled into the Lady of Darkness’ chest, clutching her and weeping, her shadow tears wisping around the two Goddesses.

“Róisín? My darling child!” The Lady curled around her daughter, running her hands over her hair. Neither Goddess paid any mind to the fact that Mother Moon was as nude as a baby coming into the world. Sobs wracked the Lady’s chest. She held her daughter tightly, never wanting to let go.

“My Lady,” the male voice said from the doorway. Mae could see the Lady stare at the figure, her three eyes blinking slowly. Fresh tears poured down her face, through her sobs she started to giggle. Mae thought perhaps she was losing her mind from being imprisoned.

“It is far too late for formalities,” The Goddess replied, reaching her hand toward her lover. He glided into the room and took her hand in his, bending down and awkwardly holding it to his cheek.

“My love, my life.” He lowered his head, brushing his lips over her knuckles. She lifted her arms to him, her fingertips digging into his shoulder.

“I have missed you so much,” she wailed, the noise grating against Mae’s ears.

“Shouldn’t we... try to, you know, unlock her?” Kiel said, standing to one side of the room, out of the way.

“First, Róisín.” The Lady tried to maneuver around the chains to embrace her daughter again. “How did you escape this nightmare?”

“Oh mama, there’s so much to tell you. I was never here in the palace. Balo kept me at his manor home. In his basement there. He tortured me

mama, he pulled my fingernails off one by one.” Róisín ran one hand tenderly over the other, wincing as she touched her fingertips. “If it wasn’t for Ophelia, I would still be there.” Róisín beamed at her sister. Ophelia blushed.

“It was nothing, really. I knew something was going on and I did something about it,” Ophelia said, brushing off Róisín’s compliments.

“Nonsense! Ophelia, please, you’ve done so much in these short days! So much has been thrown at you and you’ve taken it all in stride. You *saved* me. You came back to me.” Róisín hugged Ophelia tightly around her waist.

“As much as I am loving the family reunion, we really should get out of here,” Mae cut off Róisín, jealousy snaked through her. She should be the one saying these things to Ophelia. She knew she shouldn’t be angry with Róisín, but her nerves were shot and she was exhausted. “All my picks are broken or are in the process of breaking, so does anyone have any ideas about getting her out of here?”

“I believe that this is where I come in,” the Prince said, kneeling in front of his lover. Together they created a complete picture. Dark and light, death and life, rage and peace. “Mae, there is a room down the stairs from here. Can you please find something suitable for a Goddess to wear? I will take care of the chains.”

“How?” Mae asked, deciding she did not want to leave to find clothing when something exciting may happen.

“The same way that she was trapped,” he declared. Mae stared at him, tapping her foot, waiting for him to continue.

“Explain.” She made a circular motion with her hand as if to say *continue, because I clearly have no idea what you're saying*.

“My blood. The blood of a God.”

“Okay... You’re being as clear as mud. If *her* blood can’t get her out, then how can yours?” Mae asked curtly. She was over the way the gods talked in riddles.

“That is the simple part. My blood is of the Sun itself; molten life runs through my veins. There are not many things on this earth that can melt Silvered Iron, for it was made with the intention of keeping the moon out of the sky, however when it was created no one had guessed that The Sun would be the irons undoing.

I am the Lady's opposite in almost every way, where her touch would cause the iron to become stronger, mine will weaken it. This is also how Baló managed to capture you in the first place, my love," he said, turning to the Lady, his eyes full of apologies. "The only thing that can ensnare a God is another God. My blood. I know it was magic, elemental, but not much else. I'm sorry my love." He set his hands on the cuff that encircled the Lady's slender wrist, his brow pinched in concentration.

"I believe I may be able to explain that." Aliss stepped from behind Kiel. Her timid posture made her look small. She squeaked as she explained, "You see, when you mix the blood of a God with dried Nightsdeath flower and sequoia roots from Varanstalle, it creates a gas-like substance that will cause a God to black out. The Reaper Riders provide the best dried flora for the mixture. Death follows their every footstep, turning most normal plants to a variation of Nightsdeath. It's not hard to mix, mortar, pestle, blood done, but you need a sorceress to do it for you."

"A sorceress? Really," Mae said, rolling her eyes.

"There you go, explanation." The God of Light cut her off. "Now, dress, go. Mother Moon is immortal, not immoral." The God of Light commanded. Mae scurried from the room, slamming the door behind her.



"Mother Moon is immortal, not immoral," she imitated the Prince in a high-pitched falsetto, bobbing her head around, making faces at the darkness in front of her. "Fucking Gods. Ungrateful. Bend over backward for them, return their daughters!" She shook a fist at the ceiling. Orion flew down and landed on her shoulder. Chirping into her ear. "And what do you get for it? You're on dress duty, like some fucking hand maid." She made her way back down the stairs, stomping as she went. She didn't care who heard. She'd decided she would slice anyone who bothered her. She wasn't sure why she was so angry, possibly because she had brought not one but two daughters back to the Afterworld and found the Lady of Darkness *and* tried to free her, albeit unsuccessfully, and as a thank you she was called a halfling and told to go run some mundane errand while everyone else got to free The Goddess.

"It should be Aliss getting the fucking dress. She is the newest member of this rag-tag group. Not me," she pouted as she stopped in front of a door. Unremarkable in any sense, but the only one she had found so far. Mae seized the knob and turned.

"No, no... oh Gods!" She heard heavy panting coming from what she assumed to be the bed.

"Lydia, oh, oh!" A male voice moaned as he felt release, spreading his seed into or on Lydia. Mae didn't want to know.

Of course! They're having sex again! Because what else could go wrong right now?

"Hate to break up this little love session," Mae said. The girl, Lydia, squealed as she pushed the male off of her and grabbed for the blankets.

"Who the fuck are you?" the male, an older man, said. He raised up off the bed, standing at his full height, towering over Mae by a foot and a half at least. The skin around his eyes and mouth wrinkled with age. He could be this girl's father. His little soldier stood at attention, bouncing comically as he puffed out his chest, trying to assert authority. Mae barked out a short mean laugh and brushed past him, making her way to the wardrobe. "Excuse me, you little whore. I said, 'who are you?'" The man grabbed her upper arm as she passed, his chubby fingers digging into her bicep. Spinning on her heel Mae lashed out, gripping the man's jewels in her hand. She squeezed and twisted, watching in delight as his face turned purple, he let out a howl of pain.

"Would you kindly fuck off? I'm in a bad mood," she hissed. She looked over the man's shoulder where she saw Lydia, a petite redhead, had tears running down her face. A pang of sorrow whipped through Mae's chest.

"Did he?" she questioned, not wanting to say the words. A small nod from Lydia was all she needed. She grabbed her dagger, the one with the eagle for *justice*, and sliced the man's nether region. He wailed and dropped to the floor, hands at his crotch covered in blood. He rolled around on the floor, cursing her.

"You bitch, you fucking, argh," he wailed.

"Thank you," Lydia whispered; her eyes down turned.

"Don't thank me," Mae said. "None of this makes everyone else I've killed a redeemable act. In fact, you should probably go, before I change my mind and just kill both of you." She flicked her hand toward the door

and walked back to the wardrobe. She kicked the man as he lay curled up on the floor. “I *should* kill you. She's a human, not a fucking toy.” She kicked him again, hearing the satisfied *whomp* as her boot made contact with his doughy flesh. Grabbing his hair, she yanked his head back. “This might be better, though. Can't force yourself into unexpecting girls if you've got nothing to force.” She dropped his head, watching it smack off the wood floor. Stepping around his naked bloody body, he heard the bedsprings give. Feet pattered across the floor, as Lydia left the room.

Poor girl, forced against her will. Just wait till she finds out about that soldier; she definitely won't be thanking me then. She looked at the man one last time before opening the wardrobe. The twisted look of agony on his face was satisfying.

Worth it. Mae thought. She grabbed a fistful of fabric and pulled, ducking as silk fluttered out of the wardrobe. She gathered the dresses that had fallen and stalked back to the top of the tower.

“Well, I guess you don't send an Aliss to do a Mae's job,” she said to the empty stairwell.



Mae pushed open the door to the room at the top of the stairs. the Prince had freed the Lady of her chains.

“Mae! You missed some wild stuff!” Kiel called out. “You should have seen it! He was glowing like the sun itself!” He wildly gestured to The God who had his back turned to them, shielding his lover from the rest of the room.

“Spare me the details, Kiel. She's free, that is all that matters. I had my own adventure,” Mae said, holding up the pile of silk. Ophelia came over, gently taking the clothing from Mae. Smiling at her, she mouthed a thank you and blew her a kiss before helping her mother into a dress.

Definitely worth it. The Lady of Darkness stood before them. She was tall and regal. Her time spent in chains was forgotten quickly as she stood with her back completely straight. Her bone pale skin shone in the moonlight.

The moonlight? Mae ran to the window, seeing the bright orb had graced the sky once again.

“The moon... you're not just Mother Moon, are you? You are *the* moon.” The Lady stared at her, all three of her black eyes pinning Mae to her spot.

“That is correct, Maeva of Elecara. I am the moon; the moon is me. When Balo had me chained against my will, I disappeared from the sky.” The Lady floated around the room, making her way toward the window. “Where is Balo?” The Goddess questioned, a note of vengeance in her voice. “I owe him death.” The group stayed quiet. Mae shifted her eyes to the floor, noting the gleaming wood. She wasn’t planning on being the one to tell The First Goddess she would be denied her revenge.

Footsteps were coming toward the room, getting louder as they got closer. the Prince stepped up beside the Lady, putting a protective arm around her. The Goddess pushed her daughter of Shadow behind her silken black skirt. Mae stood beside Ophelia, slipping the opal angel dagger into her hand. She felt Ophelia shudder; in fear or anticipation, Mae couldn't be sure. Aliss pushed Kiel behind her. He tried to get back in front of her, cocking the crossbow. She turned toward the door flipping her hands upward. Mae watched as they crackled, tiny bolts of lightning sparked from her fingertips.

A sorceress. So, she wasn't lying. Mae thought, before she could ponder the idea of a real sorceress in her presence someone came into the room. Bouncing back and forth on her toes, again grateful she switched to her boots, Mae held her dagger in her fist, ready to fight.

“Turran!” the Prince boomed, relief washing over his face.

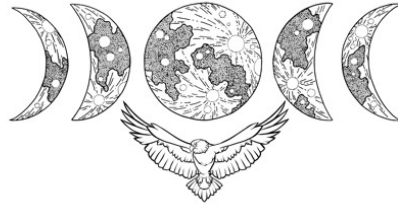
“I'm... woah, sorry didn't mean to startle anyone,” Turran replied.

“You nearly got butchered,” Mae stated, flipping her dagger in the air, catching the hilt in her palm.

“I can see that. What is...” Turran was cut short by more footsteps coming to the door.

“Someone asked about my lunatic father, did they? I believe I can answer your questions.”

Chapter Twenty-four



Lucien stepped into the room, making his way to the center of the group of shocked faces. Mae noted the distinct smell of rot emulating from the half dead boy. Her head started to pound again, a headache forming behind her eyes. This child had such an effect on her, but she didn't know why. A boy, that's all he was. He was forever frozen at the age of nine. He barely came to Mae's chest in height. His grey skin flaked off to bone in places, dried muscle and sinew popping through in others. His black fathomless eyes held the same gaze as a man who had seen too many things go wrong in his life. He walked with confidence and arrogance, although Mae noted slight jerky movements.

"First, I assume everyone is wondering how I returned from the Afterworld after Hell Water burned me from the inside out." Lucien held everyone captive with his words. Mae was dizzy from the stench rising off of him. She tried to concentrate.

"Not really..." Kiel whispered.

"Silence!" Lucien commanded, his voice rising an octave. Kiel shrunk back, keeping his mouth shut. "I was only a child when I perished. A child! The picture of innocence! However, she," he said gesturing to the Lady of Darkness, despise for her clear in the set line of his jaw. "Took no mercy on me. With barely a glance in my direction she sent me to my nightmares. I watched day after day as my parents showered my idiot sister with love. I was no longer the precious heir to the throne." Ophelia gasped, holding a hand to her chest, hurt by his words. Lucien ignored her

and continued, "It was then that I realized that this hell was my reality, that my parents never loved me, that they had lied to me. My father had decided a wretched girl was more suitable to take my rightful place as ruler. My whore mother never loved me, anyway.

I swore then that I would make it back to the mortal realm and I would claim what was rightfully mine. Day after day I battled my own daemons, eventually I conquered them. Slaying my nightmare family and leaving them to rot in the pits of the Afterworld.

I will be adored. I will have my rightful place in Elecara. I will rule all the realms. Or everything will burn," he hissed.

"So... you're a spoiled brat?" Mae said. Lucien spun toward her, his arm blurring as it smacked into her face. Her head snapped to the side; she was floundering as black crowded her vision. She struggled against the darkness that wanted to consume her, pull her into a deep sleep, and not let go.

"Lucien!" Ophelia scolded, wagging a finger at the boy who used to be her brother. "You've got it all wrong. Your parents loved you, your father loved you. This revenge is uncalled for." Lucien peered at Ophelia; confusion marred his face. A small flash of recognition for the Goddess he grew up next to, but as quickly as it appeared it was gone again. He threw his head back.

"Shut up! You're wrong. You're wrong! They never loved me! No one loved me. No one!" Lucien clamped his hands over his ears, curling in on himself. After a few moments of sobbing, he stood back up and faced Ophelia again, the little brother gone. In his place was a malevolent being. "But Elecara will, and if they don't, they will learn to! I deserve adoration. No being man or God shall stand in my way. Anyone who challenges me will die."

"And now he's going to tell us how he plans to kill off four Gods and rule the realms," Kiel said, leaning back against the wall. "Can't wait to hear this one."

"Would you shut up!" Lucien screamed. He waved a hand, and a wind picked up, from where Mae wasn't sure. If she had to guess, she thought, it was coming from the child monster himself. Lucien shrieked and flicked his wrists out, throwing Kiel through the air. Mae could hear the air leave his lungs as he cracked against the stone wall, an avalanche of broken rock falling around him. A gash opened from his forehead to his cheek, slicing

directly through his eye. Blood poured down his face. Kiel screeched, folding in on himself, pressing his hands to his face. Aliss ran over to him, collapsing beside him in a flurry of silk skirts. Running her hands down his back, trying to lift his head toward her. Kiel pulled away, trying to stanch the bleeding with his fists. Orion swooped off Mae's shoulder, landing beside the sorceress.

"Now," Lucien said, pulling the attention back to himself. The wind had died down, confirming Mae's suspicion that he had created it.

"I will have my revenge; I crawled my way back from that nightmare world you left me in. I swam the Hell Waters of Darkrael! I am the most powerful human in existence!

You asked about my father, but he was just a pawn, a blundering fool. A useless puppet that I controlled! When I returned from the Afterworld, it was I who orchestrated the whole plan! I used him to capture The Goddess of Shadows and the Lady of Darkness. I was the one who kept you chained here. Me! You hear. Me! Not that useless fool!" Mae noted that Lucien's voice went up a few octaves as he got angrier. His movements grew more jerky.

At that exact moment, something fell from the ceiling, Róisín screamed as Balo's beaten and broken body fell in a heap beside her. His eyes were bloated out of their sockets, staring at nothing, his face forever twisted into a horrified scream. His fingers curled into claws, seeming to reach toward Róisín. She scrambled back, hiding herself in her mother's skirts. She may be centuries old, but she was still a child.

"As you can see, my father is no longer needed, so it was time for him to be disposed of. He was already losing his mind; the poor fool thought love would save him. Such is the curse of his blood," Lucien sighed, gazing upon his father's broken body. He kicked it once. The Prince of the Sun stepped forward, his bronze skin glowing. He pushed his daughters behind him, trying to shield them from the child. He stood proud, tall and elegant beside the Lady of Darkness.

"This is enough Lucien; you cannot kill an immortal." The Prince held his hands up. They started to glow, tendrils of light coming from his fingertips, entwining with the black oil like substance coming from the Lady. It snaked toward Lucien, wrapping around his wrist. Lucien howled.

"No!" He slammed his hands down, his voice high again. He broke the bonds of light and dark around his wrists. He moved his hands so fast Mae

couldn't track them. He smashed his fist into his palm causing a shock wave. Mae watched as a long crack opened itself up in the stone, running fast toward the ceiling. She heard as the stone started to tear away from itself, and dove toward Ophelia, wrapping her arms around her waist and flung them both out of the way as a chunk of rock smashed into the ground right where Ophelia had been standing. Lucien didn't give up his assault. He flung bits of debris around the room. Mae dodged them and slowly made her way toward the boy who was now only a monster. Róisín stepped in front of Lucien, manipulating the shadows in the room, trying to capture the boy in the deep black of the room, but he moved too fast. He pushed his hands out, throwing Róisín against the wall. Her small body sliding down, crumpling in a heap of pale skin and emerald velvet.

“Ró!” Mae cried, ducking to the floor and crawling toward the small Goddess. She took a tiny pale hand in hers, the skin cold. She could see Róisín's chest rise and fall in shallow breaths. She was still alive, unconscious, but alive. Mae let out the breath she very well knew she was holding and gently gathered her small body, making her way slowly to where Kiel and Aliss were cowered beside the fireplace, trying to keep out of sight. The task proved to be easy as Lucien's attention was on the Gods.

“Keep her safe,” Mae instructed Aliss, who simply nodded, lightning crackling along the palms of her hands, ready to fight off the monster if needed. Mae gestured to Orion who hopped over to her. “Keep them all safe Ri, please,” she whispered, the eagle nodding at her.

Anything for you. Came the reply in her head. She wrapped her arms around the bird, burying her head in his neck.

“Thank you, Ri, I love you, you beast,” she whispered again. Mae heard a scream and whipped her head around in time to see The Lady melt the skin from her arms and face, turning her into a half skeleton half beautiful Goddess. Her anger brought forth the malevolent spirit within, her three eyes no longer black, but white and glowing. The true form of an all-seeing being. Black poured from her and slithered along the ground toward Balo's body, wrapping it in the slick substance. She clenched her fist and Balo's body crumpled in on itself, disappearing before Mae's eyes. All that was left behind was rust-colored dust in the shape of his body. Mae felt a pang of sympathy flow through her, quickly replaced by the feeling of justice. Balo was an evil man, a lunatic sure, but also evil. He

may not have deserved the ending he got, but he did not deserve to live as a free man either.

“Surrender now, child, or suffer the same fate as your father,” she bellowed.

“The same fate? I am already dead; I have suffered enough have I not?” the boy shot back, standing tall.

“You seem to forget that I possess the power to wipe your after life from existence as well. Mind yourself child, you were judged fairly. You reap what you sow. You forget that my word is final,” the Lady spoke with authority. Lucien howled. The debris in the room shook with his anger. He lifted his arms. A piece of stone wall, the size of the door, rose with them. He spun it in the air and aimed it directly at the Lady of Darkness. He threw his hands forward, the rock flying toward her chest, right where her heart should be. Mae watched helplessly as the debris barreled toward the Lady. Time slowed down as she saw a hulking dark figure fling itself in front of the Goddess. An excruciating shriek left its mouth as it collided with the projectile. The figure folded around the stone as it smashed into the wall. Mae heard a scream, hers, as her vision tunneled. The screaming didn’t stop as she saw the spiraling horns scrape against the stone.

“Turran! Dad!” the words spewed from her mouth so quickly. Turran, a man she had never met, was her father. She bolted forward to where he was pinned between the wall and the large rock. He slid down; a trail of blood followed him to the floor, leaving behind a gruesome path. He gasped for breath, opening and closing his mouth like a fish out of water. “Dad. You can't *die*! Are you joking! I just got you back and you go and get yourself killed! Orion! Ri! Help!” Tears poured from her eyes. Orion flew over, landing in a flourish of feathers beside her. He lifted her arm with his head. Turran opened his eyes.

“Maeva, my lovely daughter. I’m so blessed to have met you. Never forget that I love you.” Blood burbled up his throat, he coughed, spraying sticky red over Mae's arms.

“No! Dad. You can't die. Why would you jump in front of that stupid rock?” she sobbed, her nails scrabbling at the rock. “Ri! Heal him please,” she begged.

“Maeva,” Turran said between shallow breaths. “It is too late my love; I am not long for this plane of existence. Take care of her,” he said. His

eyes landed on Ophelia who stood wide eyed, scanning back and forth between Mae and Lucien.

“I love you, Mavea,” he said, taking one more breath. He let it leave his body slowly. “May we meet again one day,” he whispered as his life trickled from his body. Mae wailed, painful sobs wracking her body. She lay her head down on Turran’s shoulder, clawing at the stone that had him pinned. Her tears slipped down her face, mixing with his blood on the floor. She wanted to give up. She never got the chance to know her father. She left so many things unsaid. She was sorry. She forgave him.

Take care of her. Stand beside her. Words from Turran flooded her mind, comforting her. She felt his strength within her bones. She stood, wiped the tears from her eyes. She would not let him down; they may have just met, but she would prove herself worthy enough to be called his daughter. She gathered her courage and let a primal cry rip from her throat. She ran into the middle of the room, screaming.

“I have had enough of the people I love fucking dying!” She threw her dagger at Lucien, her aim off due to the tears still in her eyes. It grazed his shoulder, causing brackish blood to pour from his arm. It smelled like pond scum. She didn't stop. Pulling out her remaining dagger she launched herself at Lucien. She collided with the monster, taking him down to the floor. Her rage turned her vision red. She was focused only on the child now. She stabbed her dagger down, missing Lucien, getting it stuck between the floorboards. Lucien bucked beneath her, sending her flying off him.

“Mind yourself halfling, the darkness is coming. My quarrel is not with you,” Lucien shouted, his voice turning her blood to ice.

“And I'm just supposed to stand by while you kill everyone I love! Not only are you a fucking *brat* you're delusional if you think I'm going to not defend my family!” She launched herself toward him again, barreling into his stomach.

“These Gods will never love you halfling.” Mae felt all the air leave her chest. She stopped in her tracks.

They'll never love you.

You should probably just kill yourself.

You'll never be good enough.

Burn them all.

All the thoughts of self-loathing overwhelmed her. She pressed her hands to her ears, and dropped to her knees begging the voices to stop.

Around her chaos reigned. Lucien battled with the Gods. All their full power on display. The Lady was a force to be reckoned with as she melted the remaining skin off her arms, lighting the bones beneath with an everlasting black fire. The Prince threw strands of light, molten ropes trying to find purchase around the small child. Lucien opened his mouth in a silent yell, his eyes rolling back into his head. He floated off the ground, lifting rock and furniture off the floor with him. With a deafening scream, he brought everything down at once. Clouds of dust washed over Mae, obscuring her view.



It felt like hours before the dust settled. Hours where Mae just sat there, hunched over on herself. Hours before the voices stopped telling her how inadequate she was.

She lifted her head slowly, peering around the room. She looked for Orion first, seeing the bird of prey at his full size, wings spread out over Kiel, Aliss and the unconscious Róisín. A fine layer of dust coated his black feathers, turning them gray. Aliss popped her head up from under the shelter of the eagle's wings. The girls made eye contact, a silent trust between them. They both looked away quickly to assess the damage around them. She could not see Lucien anywhere. She assumed that if he had died, there would be a body. This left only one explanation. The child monster had escaped.

Ophelia was huddled in a corner, her tanned arms covering her head. She appeared to be mostly untouched, a few small stones scattered around her. Mae started toward the woman she loved, wanting nothing more than to comfort her and take her away from this mess.

“My love!” A harrowing cry came from beside her. Mae whipped her head around to see The First Goddess collapsed over a body. The God of Light lay out on the floor. A wound had been opened in his side, a gold-tinged blood pouring from the gash, spreading along the wooden floorboards. “No! Please!” the Goddess cried. The room shook with her sobs, knocking more debris onto the floor. Mae could not tell if he was still breathing. At the very least he was unconscious. She tore her attention

from the ancient Gods and made her way over to Ophelia, lightly pulling her arms from over her head.

“Lia... are you okay?” she asked quietly, knowing full well the new Goddess was far from okay.

“Maeva!” Arms were flung around her neck, causing her to topple over. “I was so worried that I was going to lose you,” Ophelia said, crushing Mae against her.

“Lia...” Mae started, pushing back from her. “First, I can't breathe. Second, nothing is going to take me from you. Not even your monster of a brother. Speaking of... did you see where he went?” Mae looked around, hoping to spot Lucien in the wreckage.

“He fled when he destroyed the room,” Ophelia replied.

“Of course, he fucking did,” Mae said. Standing up she offered a hand to Ophelia. They picked their way over the broken rock and stone in the room, slowly making their way over to Kiel and Aliss. Orion turned his head and saw Mae. He folded his wings in and shrunk down, flying straight into her chest, he nipped at her chin and hair.

“Oh Ri!” she cried happily, embracing the eagle. Tears running down her face.

“Mae!” Kiel called, holding his shirt to his eye, his bare chest covered in dust. She saw Róisín behind him, no worse for wear, untouched by the violence in the room. Aliss sat beside Kiel, her hand in his. She stared ahead shocked.

“Leave it to you to find a time to strip while everyone is trying not to die.” Mae laughed, a sound she knew was inappropriate for the situation.

“I’ve got to show off this amazing physique somehow.” He winked, causing Mae to laugh harder and Aliss to blush a deep red.

“Alright, Casanova, think you can carry Ró? We've got to get back to the carriage.” Mae said. Kiel nodded and swung the child Goddess up over his shoulder. Aliss guided him out the doorway and Mae watched as they disappeared down the stairs. She hoped they would not run into Lucien on the way down to the carriage, knowing in her heart he was, for the moment, not a threat.

Mae felt the absence of Ophelia beside her, leaving her cold as she walked slowly toward the Lady of Darkness. Mae glanced out the window, seeing that the moon had vacated the sky, giving way to morning.

However, the sun that had risen to take its place was dim. A shadow of its former glory.

He's still alive. There is still hope. She thought. She approached the Gods, trying to stay as quiet as possible.

"Mother," Ophelia said quietly, brushing the hair off the Lady's back. The Goddess ignored her. "Mama," she ventured again. A hand seized Ophelia's, taking it so quickly Mae didn't see anyone move

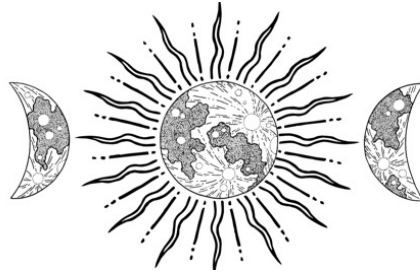
"My daughter, I still can't believe it is you." The Lady ran her hands over Ophelia's shoulders, taking her face in her hands to confirm her eyes were not playing tricks on her.

"Mother, we should leave while we still can. We need to get Father back to the Afterworld," Ophelia said, always the practical one. She put her feelings aside to focus on the task at hand. The Lady smiled at her daughter. She turned her three eyes to Mae, reaching out to take her hand.

"Thank you. For reuniting my family, Maeva of Elecara. I am forever grateful." She rose, towering over Mae. She lifted The Prince from the ground, easily as if he weighed nothing at all. She drifted toward the door, not turning around, just expecting the girls to follow her.

"It's Mae!" Mae called as she and Ophelia rushed toward the door.

The Lady of Darkness



The palace was eerily silent as the Lady of Darkness moved through it. Her whisper-soft footsteps guided her through the halls, one foot in front of the other directed her, though she didn't know where she was going. The morning was upon them, and the party had long broken up. Stragglers were sprawled out on the floor of the ballroom. Having been too drunk to make their way home they collapsed where they were and slept off the effects of the previous night. Remnants of the ball were scattered along the floor, food and drink spilled on the gleaming tile. An entire dress was thrown on the floor, abandoned by its wearer. She kicked a discarded shoe out of her way, the black heel embedded into a cake as it landed with a squelch.

The God of Light was draped over her shoulder, his chest rising and falling in shallow breaths. She adjusted her grip, clutching him tightly as if her touch could keep him alive. The wound in his side was still oozing gold-tinged blood. He groaned as she moved him, a sound that ripped her heart apart, opening a wound she never thought she would heal. She gently kissed his hand, praying that he would make it.

Who does a Goddess turn to for help?

"Hold on my love, I can't be without you," she whispered to him, though he was unconscious. She was hoping The Keeper would have an answer on how to bring him back to her. If he didn't, well, she didn't dare think of what would happen then.

She watched her daughter, her child of flames, from the corner of her eye. The tiny baby she remembered had grown into an elegant woman

without her around. She felt her heart shatter for the childhood she would never get to enjoy with this girl. Of course, she was grateful for the time she got to have with Róisín, but she would always have a small piece of her heart missing for Ophelia. She would never see her grow, never see her first steps, hear her first words. No, those memories belonged to another woman. Isabelle, she now knew, the woman who lived in the Whispering Valley. The woman who took on the task of guiding souls to the river. Although she was angry for the daughter who was taken from her, she was thankful for Isabelle for watching over Ophelia for centuries. She hoped the woman would be able to rest in peace now, having fulfilled a promise that she never should have had to make. Mother Moon made a mental note to ensure that Isabelle was taken care of in the afterlife.

The Lady of Darkness watched Ophelia as she leaned into the halfling as they walked together. It saddened her that she knew nothing of this girl she called a daughter, nor did she know anything of the half Daemon woman she was in love with. Could she accept that her daughter loved the very thing she despised? The offspring of her minions who couldn't stay away from a human's touch.

You don't have a choice. She reminded herself. *That hal- that woman is the only reason you have reunited with your daughters. She is the only reason The Goddess of Flames has returned to her rightful spot by your side. She is probably the only reason that he was able to even find you again. You better get used to calling her by her name.* She brushed her hand through The God of Light's golden blonde hair.

They crossed the entrance, walking through the gate of the palace. The Lady took a deep breath, filling her lungs with the freshest air she had felt in weeks. So sweet her chest ached from the feeling. Her lungs no longer felt like deflated balloons. She felt the grime stuck to her skin, the dress that she was in already dirty with sweat, blood, and she could only guess what else. She wanted to get back to the palace, heal the Prince and take a long bath.

As she approached the carriage, she saw the boy with the pale blonde hair, was now for some reason shirtless. His face was crusted in gore, and he was holding her daughter in his arms. She looked slight against his broad chest. The Lady knew Róisín was a force, but she felt fear, something she had now become accustomed to; a constant companion, run through her seeing her small daughter like this. The girl with the chestnut

hair, the sorceress, helped the boy gently maneuver Róisín into the carriage. After she was safely tucked away, they returned outside, staying close to each other, casting wary glances at their surroundings. The Lady watched as the boy embraced the sorceress, stroking her glossy hair. She clutched him around his waist and the Lady imagined that she never wanted to let go. The girl was looking up at him as he bent down to her, brushing his thumb over her cheek and placing a kiss on her forehead. The girl closed her eyes, smiling slightly. Ophelia ran to them, gathering them both in a hug, tears running down her face. She didn't even speak just held onto them. She watched as Maeva joined them, all smiles.

"I'll drive," Mae declared, breaking up the happy reunion.

"You're kidding right?" Ophelia said. "Mae, you're exhausted. Do you even know the way back to the Afterworld?"

"It's fine, Lia. I don't know the way, but I'm sure between me and Eluna here we'll make it," Mae replied, jutting a thumb behind her. The Lady looked to see Eluna, who was prodding at the ground. Her ash-colored eyes stared at the group. She was elated that Róisín's beloved pegasys was there with them.

"She will guide you," the Lady said quietly.

"Perfect, Kiel, Aliss, will you help me drive?" Mae said, elbowing the boy, Kiel, in the ribs.

"And me..." Ophelia pouted. Mae looked at her. The Lady saw her eyes soften.

"No, Lia. I think you two have a lot to talk about," Mae said, turning her shocking green eyes to look toward the Lady over Ophelia's shoulder.

So much like her father. She thought, deeply saddened for the loss of her head of guard. Instead of saying anything, the Lady decided to take her Prince into the carriage then, she gently lay him down beside Róisín, their chests rising and falling in unison. She brushed her thumb over his cheek, leaning down to kiss him gently. Watching his eyelashes flutter as she breathed out.

She could hear a muffled argument outside. She tried to ignore the sounds. She didn't want to intrude. She sat back against the plush satin of the carriage, closing her eyes, taking long slow breaths and finally feeling comfortable for the first time in a long time.



The carriage swayed gently. Causing The First Goddess' eyes to droop. The two immortals faced each other not saying anything to one another.

What does one say to the daughter she never knew? She opened her mouth so many times, only to close it again. Not knowing what words to say, not knowing what would make any of this better. She looked at the girl sitting across from her. Never had she dreamed that her daughter would grow to the beautiful woman in front of her. Even covered in dust, she could see the shimmering white hair; beneath the grime, she could see the luminous golden skin. Even when she was sitting down, she could see that the young Goddess had her father's height, as well as his eyes.

"I..." the Lady broke the silence in the carriage. Her voice sounded strange in her ears, too strained. She closed her mouth again. She sat quiet, for a few more moments, finally deciding on what to say. "I am so sorry, Ophelia. I failed you when you were a baby. I should have protected you better. I should never have let the two of you out of my sight. There has not been a day that has gone by that I have not thought of you," she blurted out, knowing anything she said would be inadequate for what happened and how she felt. She watched Ophelia reach toward her, her flame-colored fingers brushing against her moon pale ones. Holding her hand tight.

"I understand," she started quietly. "I don't blame you. Isabelle was good to me, even if Balo wasn't. I know how this sounds, but I can't be angry with you. I've never known any different." She laced her fingers with the Lady's. An uneasy but comfortable trust spread between the two Goddesses. The Lady felt a weight lift off her chest. Her apologies may be inadequate, but this young Goddess forgave her, and now she had all eternity to make it up to her and be the mother she deserved.

They sat in a comfortable silence as their carriage rolled toward the Afterworld, toward home.



The Prince of the Sun was tucked away in their bed. Satin cocooning his body. She wanted him comfortable despite his wounds. He had still not awoken, the gash in his side turning a dark blackish green around the edges. In the mortal realm, the sun had not returned to its luminous grandeur, leaving the realm in a dusky fog. She wanted to remain with him constantly, but there was a realm that needed ruling. Souls needed to be

judged. She kept herself busy instead, trying as hard as she could to keep her mind from her lover.

Róisín sat by her father's side day and night. Tears slipped down her face, curling off her chin in wispy shadows. She could not be swayed to leave his side, opting to lie on the floor beside the bed, tossing and turning in fitful nightmares when she was able to sleep at all. Handmaidens brought pillows and blankets for the girl to sleep on. She accepted them with grace before turning her black and gold eyes back to her father. She gripped his fingers in her small pale hand, crying harder as the sun-kissed tips started to fade. The Lady of Darkness watched in despair as her daughter cried over her father day after day. Her own oil black tears running down her face. She felt like they were running out of time, but she hoped the Prince of the Sun would be able to hold on just a little longer.

Once they had arrived at the palace, the Lady had retired to her chambers. She drew a bath, wandering over to the wall-length mirror, looking at her drawn features. Weeks of imprisonment taking its toll. She may be immortal, but she looked like a shell of her former self. Her three coal-black eyes were bruised a deep purple. What were once lustrous black locks that flowed down her back almost touching the floor, now hung around her shoulders limp like dead snakes. Her while porcelain skin had started to take on a gray hue.

She sank into the water. The heat soaking into her bones. She sighed, washing the grime and dirt from her body and hair. She lay back, staring at the ceiling feeling utterly defeated. She was so lost without her lover; he kept her grounded. She worried that the Goddess she was before, the malicious unsound being, would creep back to the surface, dooming the entire Afterworld to her malevolence.

After she was scrubbed clean, she dressed in a simple black gown, the heavy velvet dusted the floor. She braided her long dark hair out of her face and left the palace, making her way toward The Keeper's cottage.

The golden light of the Afterworld warmed her skin as she walked. She took it as a sign of hope that the light had not dimmed from this realm yet, perhaps her lover would make his way back to her sooner rather than later. Coming over the hill, she saw Darius chasing luminflies around The Keeper's cottage as he usually did when the creator was home. A small smile crept up her lips. At least the cat shaped star would never change. As

she approached the door, she lifted her hand to knock, but before she could, the door swung open. The Lady stepped inside the quaint cottage.

“Tea?” the Keeper asked, startling her.

“Oh, no thank you, Keeper,” she replied.

“My dear, there is no need for titles between us.” He poured a cup for himself, the spicy cinnamon scent reaching her nose. She sighed, reaching over the table and pouring her own cup.

“Father, I don't know what to do.” She felt like a child, lost and alone. She could feel tears burning behind her eyes, not wanting to let them fall. She wrapped her hands around the brittle porcelain, the cup rattling against the saucer. The Keeper waited patiently, sipping his tea slowly. She knew he would wait an eternity until she was ready to ask the question she dreaded the answer to.

“Will he come back to me? How do I heal him?” she finally asked. The Keeper scraped his chair back, folding his hands behind his back as he paced the cottage. His slow, deliberate footsteps started to drive her mad. She could feel the anger rising in her chest. White hot fire raged through her. She slammed her fist on the table, rattling the teacup, it fell to the floor smashing in tinkling pieces. “Are you going to say anything?” she demanded, standing up, curling her fists. Her hair started to slither around her.

“Oh, sit down, *daughter*. Remember your place.” the Keeper chided, clucking his tongue. He slowly came back to the kitchen grabbing a broom and began to sweep the pieces of teacup off the floor. Once he was finished, he calmly sat back down, his gnarled fingers drumming a beat only he could hear.

“I am aware of only one way to heal him. Heed my warning though, child, it will require a great sacrifice. One I am not sure you are ready to perform.” He leveled his eyes at her, his dragon-like eye boring deep into her skull.

“You do not know what I am ready to do! Anything, I will do anything!” she pleaded. Reaching across the table, she dug her nails into the Keeper's hand, breaking the grey skin. Blood bubbled up from crescent-shaped wounds. Desperation colored her features. “Tell me what I need to do. Please!” she begged.

“In due time, child,” he replied.

“In due time?” she screeched. “No! Father, you will tell me now! I need him. He is my air, my heart, my everything. I will do anything! Tell me, I demand it!” She could feel the panic rising in her chest. The Keeper shook his head, disappointed with her. He would not tell her what she wanted to know, today. Exasperated, she stood up, frantically pacing the kitchen. She wanted to destroy something or someone.

“When he has rested more, we will discuss what needs to be done. I suggest you get some rest yourself. The road ahead of you is rocky, Mother Moon, and it requires the ultimate sacrifice.” The Keeper stood up, offering the Lady his hand. He led her to the door, gently but firmly the simple wooden door shut in her face.

A sacrifice? She thought to herself. *I will do anything.*

Chapter Twenty-five

KIEL



Red all he sees is red. Around the scarlet, his vision blurred, black crowding in. He wondered if he would ever see again.

Pain. All he feels is pain. He wants to scream and cry and kick. The feeling is unbearable.

“Kiel?” a soft feminine voice breaks through the fog of agony. “Kiel? I can help you, just lie still,” the voice said again. He felt electric pin pricks along his body, a peaceful fog settling over his mind. His whole body relaxed, and the world went dark.



“Do you think we can help him, Orion?” the soft voice broke through the fog again. A screech brought the world into full clarity. Sharp pin pricks laced through his face. He cried out, pressing the heel of his hand to his eye, the pain so sharp and hot he screamed again.

“Kiel!” a voice, Aliss, his brain finally registered. Arms wrapped around him, holding him up.

Get a grip on yourself. He opened his good eye, or maybe both of them. He couldn't quite be sure. Staring back at him were the most beautiful, concerned bright hazel eyes, framed by dark lashes. Chestnut waves fell around sharp luminous brown shoulders, creating a curtain around them, their own little world. Plump deep pink lips pouted. He wanted to kiss them. He wanted to wrap himself up in this girl.

Good time to be thinking about kissing her he thought to himself. Another knife of pain stabbed through him. He doubled over trying not to cry out.

"You're going to have to lie still," Aliss said gently. She lay her hands on his chest and guided him down onto something firm yet warm.

Electricity prickled along his skin again. This time the fog didn't take over though.

"Orion, can I please have your assistance?" He heard Aliss ask the bird. Orion chirped in response. He tried to piece together what Aliss was asking him to do. Suddenly, it came back to him.

Magic healing feathers!

"No!" He shot up; white hot pain erupted in his face.

"Kiel! What is wrong?" Aliss exclaimed. "We're just trying to heal you!" Hands started to push him back down again.

"No! No, not his feathers. Anything but the feathers," he begged.

"Why not?" she asked, huffing.

"Because..." he said between short breaths. "Because I've heard that girls dig scars." He finally finished sitting back. Laughter bubbled up around him. He was so delirious from the pain he couldn't figure out if he was the one laughing. "And... we'll match. How's that sound feathers?" Orion whistled and fluffed up his wings, glaring at Kiel. "Sorry, Orion." Kiel bowed his head at the bird. Satisfied, Orion flew to the corner of the room and watched.

"Alright, my brave, brave man," Aliss said, brushing his hair off his sweaty forehead. "If you won't let Orion heal you, the best I can do is keep you comfortable. You'll never be able to see out of your eye again, though." She had confirmed his suspicions. Kiel sucked in a breath and nodded as lightning crackled from Aliss' hands. She placed them over his destroyed eye, the pain finally receding to a dull throb. He watched through his other half lidded eye as she picked up clean white bandages. She applied a cool salve to his face, further reducing the throb, although it still wasn't gone completely.

Annoying, but manageable. He thought.

"I don't need to see with both my eyes to know how beautiful you are," he said, bringing Aliss into his arms, causing her to drop what she had in her hands. He held her tight, knowing then and there he didn't want this to ever end. Apparently, almost dying made him realize that taking home girl

after girl from the tavern wasn't how he wanted to spend the rest of his days. He wanted something real. Could she be something real? He wanted to find out. She sighed against his chest. Kiel lifted her chin and brushed his lips against hers, tentative, asking a question. She grabbed the small hairs at his neck and dragged his face down to hers, crushing them together. He could scarcely hear Orion chirp his annoyance at their affection. He flew off cawing loudly.

Prudent fallen stars.

"You know what I think?" he said after a long moment.

"What do you think?" she asked, drawing small circles on his still bare chest.

"We should get married!" he exclaimed.

"Married? Kiel! We met hours ago!" Aliss laughed, a tinkling bell-like sound, but she didn't pull away from him.

"You're right, of course. Okay... we should... sleep together? No, no... get to know each other? Go for a walk? I don't know Aliss. All I know is I don't want you to leave." He took her hand in his, bringing her knuckles to his lips. Her laughter died out.

"Well, I'm no whore, so we'll have to get to know each other," she stated firmly. He stared at her with his good eye. She stared back just as intently. A smile formed on his face, and she mirrored his actions until they were both laughing hard, wrapped up in each other completely.

"Deal," he said, pressing a kiss into her soft brown hair.

Chapter Twenty-six

OPHELIA



She sat in front of a mirror, running her fingers over her face. She barely recognized herself. Her skin was lustrous and soft. A golden glow came from within. Her eyes were the most unexpected change, a sunrise. Which sunrise? Perhaps one day she would know. Standing, she ran her hands down her torso, the deep merlot dress tickled her hands. Nerves fluttered through her stomach. A pair of dainty shoes sat on the floor beside her bed. She slipped them on, feeling the cool silk around her foot. She laced the ribbon around her calf, admiring the color against her skin, a perfect match to her dress. She ran her hands through her hair, the white strands curling around her fingers. She let the soft waves fall down her backless dress.

A knock came at the door. She floated across the room, attaching moon drop earrings to her lobes. Opening the door, she was greeted by the most beautiful woman she had ever laid her eyes on.

“Ophelia,” Mae whispered, drifting into the room, encircling her waist. Ophelia smiled, bending her head down to kiss her.

“You look...” Mae fumbled for words.

“I look?” Ophelia prompted, her head swimming. The woman in front of her filling her senses.

“You look beautiful, truly a Goddess.” Mae reached up, adjusting the crown that Ophelia's mother insisted she wore. Gold inlaid with moonstone gems; two crescent moons sat back-to-back in the middle on her brow. Mae bowed, causing Ophelia to laugh out loud.

“What are you doing?” she asked, reaching out trying to get Mae to stand. She felt the heat of embarrassment color her cheeks.

“Offering my respects,” Mae replied. Ophelia looked her up and down, her hair had been expertly braided out of her face in two inverted braids. Her curls tamed, falling around her shoulders, a sultry look in her eyes. Her pale skin stood out against the black she wore. A corset style leather top adorned her waist, black silk bat wing sleeves covered her arms, likely hiding a dagger. She wore leather pants, a silver chain mail style belt slung low on her hips. Ophelia noted the eagle and angel daggers sitting crossed on Mae’s left side, out in plain sight, worn like a badge of honor. Knee high boots were laced up to the top. Her piercing green eyes wandered over Ophelia, making her blush. She was absolute darkness, and she was absolutely beautiful.

“Maeva,” Ophelia whispered, kissing her again. She felt Mae's hands twist in her hair, her kisses coming faster. Low moans started in her throat. As agonizing as it was, she pulled back. “Where are you going? The party doesn't start for another hour.” Mae pulled at her dress. Ophelia giggled, setting a firm hand on Mae's shoulder.

“There's nothing I would rather do than ravish you right now,” Ophelia said. “But I've got something else in mind.” Mae quirked a sculpted eyebrow up, a confused smile on her lips. Ophelia disappeared into the small library off of her room. She saw the leather-bound book still open on the table where she had fallen asleep reading the history of The First Goddess and The God of The Sun, her parents. Stuffing her hand down the cushion of the oversized chair, she rummaged around, finding what she was looking for. Something her mother had left in the book for her to discover. She practically danced back into the bed-chamber, smiling at Mae's puzzled look. She skipped over to Mae and grabbed her around the waist, sweeping her into a tight embrace.

“What is going on, Lia?” Mae asked, laughing caught up in the moment. Ophelia stopped. Getting serious.

“Come with me.” She grabbed Mae’s hand, pulling her out of the room.



They stood on a large rock overlooking the waterfall at Nyneve’s cove. The golden light of the Afterworld shimmered on the water’s surface; it worried Ophelia that she could see the light dimming every minute.

Ophelia watched as the merfolk beneath the water spun and flipped, enjoying their afterlife. She saw Mae lean over the edge, brushing her fingertips along the mirror surface. Ophelia pulled her back from the ledge, draping her arms over Mae's shoulders.

"I love you," she whispered in Mae's ear, feeling her shiver as her breath tickled her ear. Before Mae could respond, she pulled the item from the chair out from behind her back. She took Mae's pale hands in hers. She bent down, brushing her lips over Mae's cheek, whispering.

"I want forever with you, Maeva." She saw Mae inhale sharply as she presented the ring to her. Stepping back, Mae turned her eyes up to Ophelia's, locking her in place with her stare.

"You have me forever," she whispered back. Ophelia grinned, slipping the ring onto Mae's finger, it had been forged by the stars, polished silver star metal, a moonstone sat in the middle of the ring, a crescent moon on each side, the rays of the sun stretching up from the top of the gem, running halfway up Mae's slender finger.

"Then you'll have no problem marrying me." Ophelia felt Mae's arms around her neck, rising on her toes. Mae kissed Ophelia on each cheek. She finally pressed her lips to Ophelia's, sighing against her mouth.

"Yes, yes, by the moon and the stars. Yes!" Ophelia spun her around, kissing her over and over. Mae kissed her back feverishly.

"My fire, my inferno."

Chapter Twenty-seven

LUCIEN



He stomped down the stairs.

“How dare that Daemon get in my way! I had her! She would have been dead if it wasn't for that *thing!*” He continued down the stairs, his temper rising. He kicked at the wall as he made it to the bottom, the stone crumbling under his shoe.

They never loved you, Lucien. A voice surrounded him, echoing off the stone hallway. *They never loved you, never loved you, never.* The voice taunted in a high-pitched singsong.

“Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!” The child clamped his hands over his ears. He tried to outrun the voice speeding down the hallway, the sconces full of firelight blurring past him.

No one ever loved you Lucien, you were a child and they let you drown. They laughed about your death. They were happy you were gone. The voice bore into his head. Brackish liquid poured from his eyes.

“They never loved me! No one ever loved me!” he cried into his arms. Halting his run, he curled into a ball on the floor. He sobbed for himself, a mere boy when he drowned, alone.

He felt the water seep into his skin, burning him. A thousand fires raged along his body. His stomach crumpled in on itself as the Hell Water started to shut down his organs. His lungs burned, drowning him from the inside out. He was alone, so alone, no one was coming to save him

Because no one loves you, child. A voice came to him through the water. He tried to focus on it as the water wrapped around his heart.

I will love you, Lucien. The voice came again as his heart beat one last time and he fell into black.

The small child, now a monster, huddled in on himself, living and reliving his own death over and over again. Pond scum tears flowed freely from his eyes.



Footsteps clacked toward him, the sound reverberating down the stone hallway. He slowly raised his head from his arms. He saw a woman coming toward him. She scared him. Her green seaweed hair flowed around her, coral and fish bones twisted into the strands. Her dull blue grey skin was covered by a deep purple dress. She gazed upon the child curled on the floor, her blind eyes not seeing but always knowing. She held out a hand. A calmness settled over him. What was this feeling?

“Come, child,” Nyneve spoke, the sound like rusted fishhooks against a steel bowed ship. Lucien put his small hand in hers, following her out of the palace.

“I will love you, Lucien.”

Epilogue

OPHELIA



Music swelled over the hills of the Whispering Valley. String instruments curled around flutes, the notes begging to be danced to. The sounds of celebration reached her ears. Laughing and singing, the clink of champagne flutes, tables laden with food as far as the eye could see. Thousands of people had arrived to celebrate.

She sat at the top of the valley; the grass swished through her fingers as she watched the party below her. She wanted to join, but she was not ready to yet. She could hear the mortal realm cheering for her.

“Our Goddess of Flame! We love you.” The whole celebration below her was in her honor. However, for her, tonight was not a night to celebrate. She knew Lucien was still out there. She knew he had to be stopped.

“Another problem for another day.” She recalled her shadow sister saying as she weaved her hair around the crown upon her brow before the celebration started. The tiny Goddess finally pulled herself from her father’s side to stand with her sister as she was introduced to the humans once again. She sighed, knowing she should make an appearance but having a hard time making herself move. She could not shake the feeling deep in the pit of her stomach. Something new was brewing, something worse than a spoiled child monster. Someone touched her arm lightly. She looked up into green eyes. Glancing at her arm, she saw the ring she had given Mae earlier.

“You should relax and celebrate,” Mae said.

“I can’t. Something is happening, Mae. I can feel it.”

“Tomorrow, Lia. We worry about it tomorrow. Tonight, we dance.” Mae helped her off the ground, slipping her arm around Ophelia’s waist. Mae led her down the hill into the middle of the crowd. She smiled and danced, but inside she felt sick. Disturbing thoughts of the long road ahead plagued her.

I'm coming for you, Lucien. Soon I will end this.

End of book one

Daughters of Moon and Sun





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xoxo

Elsie

About the Author

Elsie hails from the middle of nowhere Ontario Canada where she lives with her partner Eric, two children, Dexter and Theo and her dogs Oliver and Gus. From a young age Elsie has always told wild stories, creating worlds to live in to occupy her time (including one about a sentient mushroom that she made into a comic book for her father when she was young).

In her free time (what's that) Elsie enjoys hanging out with her children, exploring the forest and finding cool things to collect. She also dabbles in wildlife photography (especially eagles) and reads... a lot... a lot a lot.

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